I

Nathan woke up to a feeling of utter helplessness.

His sleep had been disturbed by a sensation that he wasn't alone in his two-story colonial home. But when he had tried to sit up in bed, he found himself unable to move from lying on his back to a more upright position. Furthermore, his breathing, while quiet, required effort as though there was an invisible weight pressing down on him.

Was he in the middle of a stroke? If so, it made no sense. He was only in his thirties, didn't smoke, and wasn't overweight. Had he strained his muscles at work last night? True, he ran a small moving company with his friend and brother-in-law, Mike Ferris. But he had gone to bed without any major complaints, so that too seemed unlikely.

What, then? His eyes looked around his bedroom. His nightstand, bookcase, and chest-of-drawers were all in place; nothing was out of the ordinary. But for some reason, the floor was obscured by mist or smoke of some kind. For a moment, he wondered if his house had caught fire, and he was in the midst of smoke inhalation. No. The mist was cold, and he heard no sounds from outside.

That said, he felt a certain level of dread, and not just because of the paralysis. He had the vague feeling that something, or someone, was watching him. His gaze wandered over to the door. Sure enough, a crack was visible. He thought he could see the glimmer of an eye in the darkness, as the door slowly, noiselessly glided open…

With a start, Nathan bolted up in bed as his alarm clock sounded. Sweating, he looked around his room. It was morning, the mist was gone, and he could see clearly the town of Oakwood, Indiana starting its day outside his window. He looked at his door, and saw that it remained shut from when he had retired the previous night.

Sighing, he stood up and walked over to his closet to select his attire for the day. He remembered he had a big moving job today, and nightmares weren't going to help the matter any. He and Mike needed to drive two hours to Louisville to pick up the furniture for a new resident to their town.

As he dressed, he thought about their new client. He knew little about Lilith Bel, having only talked to her a few times via long-distance phone. She was a middle-aged, independently wealthy woman who had told him a

week ago that she had wanted to settle in the Midwest. To that end, she had had a large home constructed in the country just outside of town. Then, she contacted him and offered several times his normal fee if he would handle the transportation of her belongings. The distance from Louisville to Oakwood suddenly diminished for him.

Not that money held any real pleasure for him; he merely appreciated the rewards of an honest day's work. No, little gave him pleasure since he had lost his wife two years ago. He finished dressing and went into his bathroom to shave. As he looked into the mirror, his gaze wandered to the picture he always kept there.

Already several years old, it showed him sitting next to a strikingly beautiful, fair-skinned woman. Both of them were in army fatigues; they had signed up for and served in the Iraq war together, doing a tour of duty

overseas. The woman's complexion almost suggested ill-health, but the sparkle in her dark eyes and the fact that she was neither too heavy nor too slender showed her to have once been very much alive. In the picture, she smiled sweetly as Nathan had his arm around her.

It's funny, Nathan thoughts as he gazed sadly at the portrait*. I didn't even know her until college. I only had a few years with her after that. But what joy and sorrow I've had because of her.*

His life had been going straightforward enough. His family owned the moving company he now owned. All he had to do was earn a business degree from Oakwood University and he would have his career set. But on a whim, he had taken an elective course in history, coming into contact with Professor Beaumont.

The professor had taking a liking to him, and had invited him to his home for dinner one night. Indeed, the

very house Paxton now inhabited once belonged to the man who became teacher, friend, and eventual father-in-law. He had met Beaumont's wife, also a professor of antiquity, and their daughter, who was a graduate student in the English department.

Elaine Jessica Beaumont had enchanted him from the moment he met her. She was writing her thesis on an old English epic called Bronwyn and Lir, and the family believed that the epic had a basis in fact. She explained that she had studied census and immigration records for both America and England. She believed that the people of Matheson County were among the descendants of the legendary couple.

"Bronwyn was lovely and brave, but died young," Elaine had told him. "Her husband searched for years to bring her back to life."

"Did he succeed?" Nathan had asked.

“Not in the end. He was forced to live his life.” She smiled at him, then. “You know, I think we’re right. I think you may well be his remote descendant.”

“Well, if he was real.”

“You’d be surprised what’s real.”

So he was. Elaine had taken him out of his comfort zone. They had travelled together, learned together, and even signed up for the service after 9/11. It had been her idea; she had been adventurous, but somewhat impulsive. She later described him as her anchor and herself as his sail.

They had married after returning home, moved in with her parents until they could get their own life started, and experienced happiness he had never felt possible.

It didn’t last. About two years ago, Oakwood was hit with an epidemic. No doctor could figure out how or why, but about half the town sickened and died from some type of respiratory infection. Both his parents and hers had been among the first victims. Then, as if that wasn’t bad enough, Elaine herself became very ill. She dropped several pounds, grew paler than normal, and towards the end, even had clumps of her once thick hair fall out. The doctors could do nothing. All their tests came back negative. There was no tumor, infection, or any known disease. Her body simply stopped taking in nutrients, and her organs shut down one by one.

He had held her hand when she had finally gone. He felt a lump rise in his throat and tears in his eyes even now. *Stop it,* he thought. *Crying does no good. You spent nearly six months crying.*

He had nightmares from time to time ever since. Usually, they involved him reliving his wedding day, interposed with the day of Elaine's death. He'd be saying his vows, but instead of music, the whine of a life support system announcing death filled his ears.

Why did God make me watch her die? Why did I have to see the final moment?

Enough!

With sheer will, he forced the lump back down his throat and dried his eyes. Then he went downstairs to get ready for the day.

A few minutes later, Nathan was pulling up to his office downtown. Mike and his sister, Helen, would be there waiting for him. Walking in, he found Helen at the

desk, filling out paperwork as she always did on Monday mornings.

“Good morning,” he called out. “Where’s Mike?”

She looked up and smiled faintly. Her features mirrored his to the point that they could have been twins. Mike had quipped that he loved her anyway.

“The trucks are ready to go to Louisville,” Helen replied. “But Mike snuck out back for a smoke.”

“I thought he was supposed to quit.”

“He was. Try to talk some sense into him, will you?”

Nathan smiled. “Not likely.”

He walked through the office to the back parking lot. Four of their largest moving trailers were ready to pull out. There was a larger one to take away a mobile home as well. Ms. Bel’s new property had belonged to a

Mr. Smith who had tried to run a small farm. The farm failed, and the property had gone for sale at a charity auction, although until now, no one had known who had bought it. It was largely a wooded area, with an old mobile home and decaying barn in the cleared area; Ms. Bel had requested that the mobile home be removed as she had built a house there.

Sure enough, Mike was leaning against the back wall, casually smoking a cigarette. Mike Ferris, while the same age as Nathan, was noticeably heavier and stockier. Unlike him, however, his nature was far more easygoing and his demeanor generally upbeat. One couldn't ask for a friendlier man.

"Hi," Mike said. "Almost ready."

"Morning, Mike. Smoking kills."

Mike snorted and took one more puff off of the cigarette before putting it out under his heel. “I told Helen, if the epidemic didn’t kill me, a smoke won’t either.”

“Said everyone who got cancer.”

“You know it wakes me up when I’m dragged out of bed by demanding relatives. I only smoke six cigarettes a day at most. I won’t die from something like that.”

Nathan, despite his sadness this morning, couldn’t help but chuckle. “You’re hopeless. Ready to leave?”

Mike shook his friend’s hand. “See you in Louisville. Try not to get lost on the way.”

“I’ll try my best.” He climbed into a waiting truck and Mike started up the second. Two more of their trucks followed. Soon, they were on their way.

Several hours later, Nathan led the caravan of trucks down a gravel road to Ms. Bel's house. The drive to and from the airport had been pleasant enough, but one of the loads had been on a second, delayed flight, so Mike had been forced to stay and wait for it. Consequently, Nathan led the remaining trucks out to the countryside. After several long country miles of hills and woods, their destination came into place.

The mobile home was on the far left of the clearing, while the decrepit barn occupied the other half. In the center of the open space was the strangest house he had ever seen. Roughly shotgun in layout, the outside was composed of stone, and seemed to almost mimic a medieval fortress. The windows were narrow slits in the side, the front had two massive double doors with steps leading from them, and the back tapered into a circular tower. The neatly trimmed yard was fenced in by a low

stone fence. But the fence gate was open, and the driveway was empty so he had plenty of room to park his truck. The others pulled over on the road immediately outside.

Terrific, Nathan thought. An ‘eccentric’ millionaire.

However, when he walked up the front step and knocked, the person who answered him seemed reasonably normal. A middle-aged, somewhat tanned woman opened the door and faced him. Shoulder length black hair framed features that curiously didn’t seem to belay any specific ethnic group. Rather, it looked more like a composite of all peoples, as if he were meeting an archetype instead of a real person. Her build was large and strong, her eyes dark, and her smile knowing.

“Good afternoon, sir. I’ve been waiting for you.” Despite her coming from the east coast, her accent had

nothing of New England in it. It sounded almost… archaic.

“Ms. Bel?” Nathan asked.

The woman smiled again, and bowed slightly. “I am Lilith Bel. And you are Nathan Paxton; I recognize your voice from when we talked. You are a little late; is anything the matter?”

“No. But there is one more truck coming,” he answered courteously. “There was a small flight delay with the last delivery of your belongings. You know how airlines are.”

“Chance has a way of unraveling even the greatest plans,” she agreed. “No matter. I long ago learned patience. Shall we go inside and begin arrangements? You may have one of the trucks take away the trailer; I have no need of it.”

She opened the door for him, and before entering, he called out to his men to begin unloading. Beyond the door there was a small parlor leading into a hallway that extended the length of the house. Ms. Bel led him on a brief tour, pointing out the empty rooms and making a few various comments on where she wanted things. One side of the house would consist of bedrooms, bathroom, and storage. The other side of the hall contained the kitchen, a dining room and library. Despite the unusual appearance of the outside, the inside seemed ordinary enough, and Nathan began to feel somewhat assured that Ms. Bel, if eccentric, would at least be harmless and unassuming. He disliked drastic change, and preferred to go through life quietly doing his job in his unchanging town. The epidemic had been enough excitement for multiple lifetimes.

At the very end of the hallway was another set of double doors that clearly led to the tower section. These doors were locked, and Ms. Bel assured him that there was nothing there he needed to concern himself with anyway.

“Anything I may place there will be on the last truck,” she said. “And I am thinking of having some additional work done on the inside first.”

The rest of the afternoon was spent tentatively arranging the furniture and removing the mobile home. Most of her belongings proved unremarkable, but Nathan did notice some oddities. The library contained many rare books, some of them centuries old and crumbling. Needless to say, he personally handled these to keep them safe, and Ms. Bel had complimented him on his care.

There was also an oil painting of a woman in an eighteenth century dress who looked exactly like Ms. Bel, although the latter had told him that it was an ancestor of hers. Finally, there were two Assyrian statues of lions with men's heads, and six stone tablets etched with some earlier form of cuneiform, that strange wedge-shaped writing used by the Sumerians.

"Leave those in the library, Mr. Paxton," Ms. Bel said about the tablets. "But please be careful. They are genuine, and I pride myself on my small collection of antiquities."

Dusk was falling when the movers left for their trucks. The house was now fully furnished, and Nathan felt satisfaction when Ms. Bel handed him a check on the front lawn. He heard the sound of an engine and looked up to see Mike finally arriving with the last load.

“This will be the smallest load, Mr. Paxton,” Ms. Bel said. “Since your men are no doubt tired, you can leave them on the lawn. Do not worry; I am quite satisfied with your work.”

The two walked up to the truck, where Mike was getting out. “Sorry,” he said. “But some of the boxes contain live animals and I had trouble getting them through security. But the attendant seemed to change his mind abruptly, as if he remembered something.”

“Animals?” Paxton asked his employer.

She nodded. “There are several goats in the crates. Pets, you could say.”

Mike and Nathan went to the back of the truck. Opening the back door and sliding a built-in ramp out of the underside of the trailer, they proceeded to carry the five large crates to the lawn. One of them was extremely

heavy, but inert. The other four had holes drilled in them and rattled slightly. Nathan couldn’t see inside, but he heard grunting and felt shuffling when he and Mike picked the first one up.

He couldn’t quite explain why, but he felt a sense of unease in handling the boxes. The smell of whatever animal was in there didn’t smell like goat, or any other type of livestock. There was a slight decaying smell about the boxes, mingled with a faint crisp aroma, as if someone nearby was grilling out. But the house was too well secluded to allow for any neighbors. Moreover, the rattling increased tremendously while they were handling the boxes.

By the time the last truck was unloaded, Nathan was soaked with sweat and filled with the desire to leave the odd locale.

“Mike, I’m taking the other truck to the office. You coming?”

“I think I’ll take the long way back,” Mike answered. “I need to fill up this guzzler’s tank.”

“All right. See you tomorrow.”

Mike went back to his truck, closed the back, and drove away. The other two trucks with the remaining workers followed. With a final nod to Ms. Bel, Nathan climbed into the cab of his vehicle and started to drive away.

He glanced causally in the rearview mirror at the house before he turned the corner on the road. What he saw almost made him stop, but he thought that it was surely a trick of the light. For a moment, he could have sworn he saw Ms. Bel walk over to the nearest box and lift it up as casually as one might lift a duffel bag.

But it was twilight, and he was exhausted, so he shrugged it off after the initial shock. Things couldn't possibly be what they seemed.

II

After parting from Nathan, Mike drove his car down a lonely stretch of road. He was headed for Lester's service station, located at the edge of town. While not terribly busy, Lester's was located on a US highway, and trucks often had to take detours through Oakwood. Mike figured that as long as highway crews took their time, the Lesters would have steady business.

He pulled up to the station's diesel pump. Four other pumps were lined up side-by-side, but there was no one there now. He got out of the truck, pressed a button on the side, and pulled out the nozzle to fuel.

“Pump one is ready,” a female voice called over the speaker.

Mike smiled slightly. Kathy was on duty. Like most people in Oakwood, he had known her most of his life. While they had never had any romantic feelings for each other, they had been friends for years, having graduated in the same class. He would have to go in and say something to her.

He finished fueling and replaced the nozzle, shaking his head on the amount of fuel the truck took. Why did it need so much? He went to the bathroom at the side of the building, washed his hands, and then went into the station’s main room.

There were a few tables in the middle for patrons to sit and eat or drink. The usual rows of junk food could be seen, and the coolers in back were full of sodas and water. Behind the counter stood Kathy herself.

She was tall and slender, with dishwater blond hair and a trim figure, despite having three children. While not particularly beautiful, and inclined to wearing too much makeup, there was an easygoing friendliness about her that made those who came into the store happy to be waited on by her. Like her husband and her father, old Mr. Lester, she was a person of simple tastes, content to make her living and serve other people by providing this small oasis in the middle of the highway.

“Hi, Mike,” she greeted with a smile. “Busy day?”

He nodded and sat at a table. Looking at a glass case next to the register, he surveyed the various cold cuts and desserts. “I think I’ll have one of those cherry pies,” he decided. “And a cup of coffee too, please.”

“Sure.” She fetched the requested items and brought them to his table. He pulled out his wallet, and

handed her the money to cover both the food and the fuel.

“Someone moved into the old Smith place,” he remarked.

“Is that right?” she asked as she took the money to the register. As she did, she thought she saw something by the lights over the pumps scamper into the bushes by the station. But it happened so fast she really couldn’t be sure.

“Yeah. His farm was a failure, so he sold it,” Mike continued from his seat. “He died shortly after that, though. That epidemic two years ago that killed Elaine and all the others. Thank God your family wasn’t…”

He frowned slightly. “Hey, is something wrong?”

She paused and then shook her head. “No. I just thought I saw an animal over there.”

“Probably a possum or something. There haven’t been any coyotes or anything dangerous for years, you know.”

“Yeah.” She finished the transaction and poured a cup of coffee for herself. “Looks like you have a long night ahead,” Mike remarked.

Kathy nodded. “Dad insists on keeping the place open twenty four hours,” she told him. “He always says someone needs help at three in the morning, even though that’s rare. I guess it could be worse, though. Since my youngest came, I only have to work about two weekends a month third shift. The weekdays are covered by Dad or Kevin, and a college student gets the other weekends.”

“How old is your kid now?”

“Two. Old enough to start talking. Learning to talk back.”

“Mine’s not that far along…yet,” Mike answered. He drank the rest of the coffee. “Thanks, Kathy.”

“Sure you don’t want a sandwich or something?” she asked. “You look hungry.”

He shook his head. “I am. It’s been a long day. But I need to get home. Hang in there.”

“Goodnight, Mike,” she said as he left.

Mike Ferris drove his truck alone down the empty road. Night had fallen and he was tired, though he was in overall good spirits. He had finished a well paying job and Helen would be waiting for him at their home by now, along with their toddler, Mike Jr. Since they both worked, they had to use a day care for him.

He smiled at the thought of his son. When Helen brought him into the world, Mike admitted that naming his child after himself had shown no originality. But, as his father had told him, all fathers wanted their sons to turn out better than they did. So Mike christened his boy Mike Jr. to challenge him to do just that. Nathan commented that the younger Mike should have no trouble.

Mike was glad that Nathan still had the ability to make jokes. He had always been smart, but prone to depression and stress. Elaine's death had only made that worse. He knew that Nathan would never 'get over' that; with such a loss, one only reached a state where he or she could continue with life. But he prayed that his friend could find some joy, as he had. Of course, he still had Helen. If he lost her, perhaps he'd be the same way. Hopefully, he would be spared the chance to find out.

An intersection came up on the horizon. By the time he reached it, the traffic light turned red, and he had to stop. Hopefully, the stupid thing wouldn’t take forever to go through its cycles.

A shadow came into view out of the corner of his eye. He turned his head, and saw a lone figure begin to cross the street in front of him. Nothing unusual about that, of course, except that, for some reason, this figure was decked out head to toe in a brown hooded cloak. Mike couldn’t make out the person’s face, although from the shape, it was a fairly good sized person.

The figure stopped in the middle of the road when it got directly in front of Mike. Turning slowly, it faced him head on, making no move to approach, but holding its ground, as though daring him to continue. It made no sounds or threatening gestures, but silently watched Mike.

The mover just stared back, dumbfounded at first. What was going on here? Was this person drunk or on drugs? Was it some high schooler or college student playing a prank? People didn’t normally just get in the middle of a road and stare at drivers.

The traffic signal above the figure turned green, but it still didn’t move or get out of the truck’s way. Mike’s bewilderment began to grow into a combination of unease and annoyance. He reached for his CB radio; something about the hooded figure made him loath to roll down the window.

“Hello? Are you all right?” Mike asked. No answer.

“What’s going on? Are you in any trouble? Hello?”

Still no answer.

“Look, would you please get out of my way?” Mike asked. He was starting to get annoyed. Since the figure

had a steady gait, he had decided that it was some idiot kid trying to scare him. Mike beeped the horn, losing patience.

“Hey! Come on. Why are you doing this?”

Then the sound of grunting and shuffling broke the silence. He turned his head, and saw several shapes moving towards him in the darkness. The intersection was abandoned, and the only lights were the signals and his own headlights, so he couldn’t tell what exactly they were. They weren’t dogs or wolves, as they approached him on two feet. But in the dark, they looked hairy, and he couldn’t see any clear head or face. What were they? Small people? Apes? What was happening to him?

Faced with an increasingly bizarre, unknown situation, his heart began pounding. Fumbling with the CB, trying quickly to replace it, he intended to drive away, either around the hooded stranger or over the

shadowy creatures. But at this moment, his cloaked opponent made its move.

A hand appeared from under the robes and pointed at him. Suddenly, his windshield and side windows shattered, as though hit by some unseen object. Instinctively, his hands went up to his face to shield his eyes. He winced as shards of glass cut his forearms.

Then his engine died, and with lightening speed, one of the things ran up to the stalled vehicle and leaped into the window. Mike cried out as hairy arms pulled his arm backwards until it broke. Mike lashed out with his other arm where he thought the creature’s head should be, and he felt teeth contact his hand and bite down.

Screaming, Mike nevertheless remained coherent enough to hear roars form the opposite window. A second creature jumped in and pounced on his back, locking its arms around his neck. Two more creatures

climbed up the truck's hood and came at him, biting his legs. He felt the teeth of the monster at his back find his neck.

Outside, the truck shook with the attackers and their victim's dying struggle. The only witness was the cloaked person, who watched it all in silence.

Nathan found himself in bed again. Like last night, he found himself surrounded by mist and unable to move. Also, like before, the door facing him began to open, and he felt that he was going to find out who was watching him.

A faint light shone on him as the door opened, revealing a familiar face. It was Elaine, his wife, lovely and smiling as she had been on their wedding night, not as she had looked in her last illness. She wore the same

white dress that she had worn in the picture on his bathroom counter.

Misgivings quickly faded to wonder and joy at the sight of her. He wanted to cry out, but he couldn't speak. He wanted to get out of bed and take her into his arms, but he still couldn't move.

Elaine smiled at him as she had done so often in life, but she didn't speak. She reached out one hand and beckoned to him. Then she turned and left the room. Once she was out of sight, Nathan found he could move, but could only walk instead of run.

He left his bedroom and looked around. His house had one hallway on the second floor that led downstairs to the anteroom by the door. Walking to the top of the stairwell, he saw that Elaine was now at the foot of the stairs and opening the front door. She turned towards him, smiled again, and motioned for him to follow.

He heard noises before he could follow her. Turning around, he saw shadows coming towards them. Elaine apparently took no notice, but Nathan felt his fear returning…

Nathan shot up in bed to the sound of a telephone ringing on his nightstand. It was still dark, and he wondered who could possibly be calling now.

He picked up the phone. “Hello?”

“Nathan, it’s Helen. Where are you?”

“At home. Why? What’s going on?” His sister sounded worried over the phone.

“Mike still isn’t home. Did you see him after the trip to Louisville?”

Nathan glanced at his alarm clock and frowned. It was almost two in the morning. “We parted after finishing the job at Ms. Bel’s,” he told her. “He was going

to fill up the truck before returning to the office. Did you try to call there?”

“Yes, and there’s no one. Nathan, I have a bad feeling. I can’t explain why, but I’m afraid.”

“Look, sis, don’t panic. Maybe the truck broke down or something.”

“I don’t know,” she sighed. “Maybe I’m overreacting. But if I don’t hear anything in a few more hours, I’m calling the police.”

“Well, hang in there. Good night.”

“Good night.”

But when Nathan hung up, he found that he couldn’t go back to sleep. Between the return of his nightmares and Mike not getting back home, he had a lot on his mind. Mike’s nonchalance notwithstanding, he had never

been unreliable. But what were the odds of anything serious happening?

Tomorrow, actually today, is Sunday, he thought. Maybe he could talk to Dr. Fowler, his minister and Professor Beaumont's cousin. He had been a help to him when Elaine first died. Maybe he could help him understand why his grief was returning now.

That morning, Kathy was driving down the road back into town. She was tired and grateful to see her relief get there. Now, maybe she could get in bed before the sun was completely up.

As she came to an intersection, she frowned at what she saw there. A truck was stopped, and despite the green light, was making no effort to move. Something seemed out of place there; perhaps an accident. But the

flashers weren’t on, so it could be something as simple as a stalled engine.

Warily, Kathy pulled her car around to pass by the truck. Looking at the sign on the side, she was surprised to see it was Mike’s. She peered into the car.

And screamed.

III

Oakwood Community Church was packed, as usual. Dr. Fowler stood at the pulpit, giving a sermon on Ecclesiastes. He was speaking of the ancient king’s final words about remembering one’s Creator in all things rather than trying to fill life with what was temporal.

Fowler stood over six feet tall, and was several pounds thinner than Nathan. He wore his silver hair short and his grey eyes were somewhat obscured by thick glasses and a full beard. Not conventionally

handsome, there was something almost owl like about his face and gaze. But like the owl, he possessed a quiet wisdom and iron will, coupled with a genuine love for God and men. That was why his sermons drew the crowds they did.

Following the benediction, Dr. Fowler walked down the aisle to stand in the cloister and greet the congregation as they departed. Nathan followed, but he saw the crowd forming around the pastor; he decided to wait in Fowler's office. Turning a corner, he walked down a hallway and sat down in an easy chair facing an old oak desk, probably made here in town. Nathan looked around the room at the shelves and shelves of books. Everything from history and theology to mythology and literature could be found there, and Nathan was momentarily reminded of the library he had set up for

Ms. Bel. Only here, among the familiar, he felt more at ease.

After nearly half an hour, Dr. Fowler came in. He looked surprised to see Nathan waiting for him, but managed as always to welcome him.

“Nathan, good afternoon,” he said. “Is there something I can do for you?”

“I just wanted to talk for a while,” Nathan said, not knowing where to begin. The last two days, he had experienced the strange dreams, had the stranger moving experience, and was now worried about Mike. “Do you have time?”

“Of course.” Fowler walked around the desk and sat down facing him. His brow furrowed in concern. “What’s on your mind?”

Nathan sighed and leaned back in his chair. “Well, you remember the epidemic. When we lost so many people.”

“It’s been two years now, hasn’t it?”

“Right. It still comes in my mind more than I like.”

“Yes. I have had a lot of counseling sessions with people over it. Nathan, there is no sin in grieving. It’s a misunderstanding that our faith requires you to be perpetually happy and never feel any negative emotions. Our own Savior cried over Lazarus.”

“You told me that at the time,” Nathan said, nodding. “Grieve, but don’t give in to rage and despair.”

“You still think of someone you loved very much. There’s no fast way to get through that.”

Nathan shook his head. “I’m not explaining this very well. For a while, I thought I was getting to a point

where I could move on. But a few nights ago, the nightmares began again. Only, they've changed. I'm no longer at my wedding. Instead, Elaine comes into my room. She's trying to lead me outside, but there's something just out of sight. Something…evil."

Dr. Fowler folded his hands in front of himself, and looked thoughtful. "Why you would be having different nightmares? Has something changed in your life?"

"Like I said there's just this sense of something trying to get me." Nathan paused at his own words. Why had he phrased it like that? He looked around the room, and then behind him to make sure that no one else was in the hall.

"There is one thing. It's been on my mind since last night. We have a new neighbor in town, and Mike and I were responsible to move her in. Well, the last boxes were very heavy; it took both of us to get them unloaded.

But as we were leaving, I could have sworn that our client picked one up by herself with no effort at all. Mike was late getting home last night, so I haven't had the chance to ask him if he saw it or not."

For a time, Dr. Fowler didn't reply. Nathan waited patiently, knowing that his minister was weighing his words very carefully. The older man rarely showed spontaneity, so when he did finally speak; his words came as a surprise.

"Nathan, do you remember one of my cousin's, the professor's, main ideas?"

"Which one?"

"The one where he believes that human history doesn't change. In a sense, he was right; some things really don't. One of those is the fact that we must choose to trust in the Savior or not. In a sense, that is a one-time

decision. But in another, it is a daily decision to put your fears, pains, and responsibilities under his care. You must keep doing that, no matter what."

Nathan stood up, sensing that it was time to go. "All right. Thank you, Dr. Fowler. Will you pray for me?"

"Of course." Fowler shook hands with him, and Nathan left the room feeling better, but still uncertain.

Police Detective Edward Thomas got out of his squad car and walked into the intersection where he had been summoned by a colleague. The deputy in question was standing by his own car, pulled up by a small truck. It was midday, and the few cars travelling the back roads had the sense not to slow down and stare.

"Detective Thomas, thanks for being so quick," the deputy greeted.

Thomas nodded. He was a middle-aged black man with a shaved head, neatly trimmed mustache, and a grim but honest face. His eyes took in the truck and he read Paxton and Ferris movers on the side. They weren't going to be happy with the loss of a truck, he thought, despite the fact that he saw no dents.

Thomas waved his hand at the truck. "What do we know?"

"Another driver reported this broken down truck this morning," the deputy informed him. "I came up and found the driver dead. His driver's license identifies him as one Mike Ferris. Resident of Oakwood, no criminal background."

"How did he die?" Thomas said. "I see no damage to the vehicle, apart from the busted window. Any marks or wounds on the body?"

The other policeman swallowed nervously. “Yeah. You’d better have a look.”

Thomas didn’t like the sound of that. But he went up to the cab door and looked in. His hand immediately went to his mouth.

Edward Thomas had gone into police work because he had wanted to serve his community. He had become a detective to fight real crime instead of ticketing speeders. In the ensuing years, he had seen his share of violent crime, even in a place like southern Indiana.

He’d never seen a body mangled like this.

But he kept himself under enough control to notice two peculiarities. First of all, he saw a few hairs on the body, obviously not the victim’s own. The second was that the windshield was completely shattered. Something

had broken through, so completely that the glass had been pulverized rather than show jagged holes.

He returned away to the deputy. “Get a wrecker here. I want this taken back to headquarters. And get lab on the phone; we’ll need to analyze all of the attacker’s traces.”

Nathan’s phone rang again that afternoon. When he had picked up, a man’s voice had identified himself as one Detective Thomas and told him that his in-law was dead. Thomas had asked him to come in with Helen and identify the body.

Nathan had driven to the police station in a state of shock. The other deaths they had experienced had been like a stab in the heart, but the illness had kept them from being a surprise. This was like being struck by

lightning. He never suspected that last night was the last time he would see him.

Mike, dead.

They had more or less known each other their whole lives. They had graduated high school together, taken college classes together, and worked together. He was the only man Helen had seriously dated before their marriage. How would she be taking this? Could he be of any comfort? He still cried over Elaine.

He pulled up to the parking lot of Oakwood Police Headquarters. Their impound lot was next door, and he could see one of his company’s trucks had been towed there. Getting out of the car, he walked in and inquired at the front desk where the detective could be found.

He was escorted to a room where Helen and Thomas were waiting for him. Helen's eyes were already bloodshot from crying.

"I came as soon as I could," he told them. He turned to his sister. "Where's your son?"

"With Kathy," she answered dully. "She found the truck this morning." She shook her head. "I don't understand. I just don't understand."

"Mr. Paxton," the detective interrupted. He grimly shook hands with him. "I'm Edward Thomas. We spoke on the phone briefly."

"Hello, sir," Nathan answered. "How did it happen?"

"We're not sure," Thomas confessed. "The windows were thoroughly broken in, and Mr. Ferris was attacked, apparently by multiple assailants."

Helen whimpered, and Nathan uneasily put a hand on her shoulder before the policemen continued. “Several hairs were found, and the wounds he suffered were consistent with being mauled.”

“Someone turned dogs on him?” he blurted. He couldn’t believe it. Such crimes just didn’t happen. Not here.

“The samples were inconclusive. All we know is that they weren’t human.”

Thomas frowned slightly. “Mr. Paxton, I’ve already questioned Ms. Ferris on her husband. She says none of you had any enemies or can think of any suspects. I haven’t had her ID the body. I want you to do that for us. Just a formality, but it must be done.”

“All right.”

As the two left the room, Helen began to cry again. “Why would anyone ever hurt Mike?” They didn’t have an answer, nor did she expect one.

Detective Thomas led him past several rooms to a door at the end of the hall. They walked in to the sterile looking room that served as a temporary morgue. Eyeing Nathan warily, he opened one of the wall drawers.

“Oh, dear God,” Nathan whispered. Thomas had described the death as a ‘mauling.’ No single word could do justice to what was before him.

“You see why I didn’t want Ms. Ferris to look at this,” Thomas said.

“It’s Mike,” Nathan barely managed to whisper in the midst of his shock. Thomas felt anger rise in him that anyone would ever do this to another human being. He

silently promised that he would solve this strange, savage case. No matter what.

“I’m going to have to contact Dr. Fowler,” Nathan said at last. “He’s our minister. We’ll need to get funeral arrangements started. Mike…he deserves some dignity… just…anything to get him out of here.”

Nathan trailed off, punched the wall, and visibly gulped tears. Thomas silently shut the drawer. The two left the room, but its contents were burned into their brains forever.

IV

Elsewhere, a lone hooded figure entered a circular chamber. The torchlight in the walls illuminated the large open space, casting strange shadows on the ceiling several feet up. The only object in the room was a

circular altar with six stone tablets arranged around a basin burning incense.

The person in the cloak knew exactly what to do. For though few remained who could read the tablet's cuneiform inscriptions, they told of arcane secrets that would chill the blood of most who could. Still, if one knew the risks and didn't fear corruption of the soul, there was much power to be gained.

Raising arms over obscured head, the figure approached the altar and began to chant in a long-forgotten language. Every syllable conveyed unholiness and barely concealed malice. The very air chilled, and torches flickered, but the figure chanted on.

At the far side of the altar, a black shadow began to appear, though no living body was there to cast it. Soon, it ceased its wavering, and condensed into a human shape standing opposite the conjurer.

No facial features could be discerned on the specter, but it gave the impression of waiting intently. The hooded one stopped chanting, and began to speak in the same language. The shadow continued to wait until the summoner pointed to the far side of the room. Then it floated away slowly and passed through the wall.

Mike Jr. was asleep finally. In the week since his father's funeral, the boy had come down with the flu. Fever, chills, fussiness, everything. Helen sat by him and gently felt his forehead.

She didn't want to deal with childhood's aches and pains now. She was still too raw from her own pain. The funeral, closed casket, had been conducted already, and there had been no legal issues. She was Mike's sole heir, of course, and they didn't have a fortune anyway. But the

emotional and mental anguish had only gone from a sharp to a dull ache.

She had been somewhat angry at Nathan for a few days. He had played the supportive older brother, and had even been one of Mike's pallbearers. But he had gone back to work after only three days, and buried himself in the work that had piled up over their absence. Worse, while he had tried to comfort her, he had had very little to actually say.

It wasn't until last night that she realized that Nathan really didn't know what to do. He still grieved for Elaine, and Helen supposed she understood. Elaine had been the type of woman most men would have given anything for. She only hoped Mike had felt the same way about her.

So, here they were. Two lonely, miserable people thrown together, wanting to comfort one another,

without having any idea how. The difference was that Nathan never had children.

She looked at her son one more time before standing up and going to bed. Yes, she would have to be strong for his sake. Being a mother overrode being a widow.

The next day, she finally went back to work. Nathan was off on another job, so she had the office more or less to herself. Frankly, she preferred it that way now.

The front door opened, and Detective Thomas walked in. “Hello, Ms. Ferris. I see you’ve come back to work. How are you doing?”

“As well as to be expected, I suppose. Have you found anything?”

He shook his head, frustration in his eyes. “I’ve done the most obvious things,” he told her. “I checked with Animal Control, but there haven’t been any reports of dangerous animal attacks. I’ve also questioned the residents that I know have vicious dogs, but most didn’t even know your husband well, and all could account for their animals at the time of the murder.”

“So, what do we do now?” she asked.

“Well, since I’ve exhausted the known animal possibilities, maybe I should look for hidden ones. Oakwood doesn’t have a gang problem to speak of, but perhaps someone tried to buy a vicious dog without registering it.” Oakwood, unlike other communities, had seen the wisdom in trying to control aggressive animals. But there were always those who bent or broke the rules.

“Your company handles most of the moving in this area,” Thomas continued. “Can you give me a list of the moving jobs for the last few months? It’s a long shot, but I want to see if any could conceivably be animal deliveries.”

“Let me see.” Helen turned back to her computer and punched in a few commands. Presently, a few papers emerged from the printer, which she handed to the detective.

Thomas scanned them for a few minutes in silence. Then, his eyebrows rose slightly. “Have you spoken with a Ms. Bel recently?”

Helen thought for a moment. “No, but I do remember that name. Lilith Bel was the lady Nathan and Mike had to go out of town for. She moved here from out of state, and her belongings had to be flown in. That was the last night before…”

Edward Thomas knew it was farfetched, but it was the best lead he had. “So she didn’t know you before then?”

“No, I’ve never even seen her. Even if she did have guard dogs or something, how and why would she turn them on my husband?”

“That might not have been what happened. The dogs, if there were any, might have gotten loose. Mr. Ferris was attacked only a few miles from this address on a fairly sparse road. His tank was full, so he did spend a few minutes fueling up. There’s a window there where something could have happened.”

"But no other attacks were reported."

"No. But if the hypothesis is true, Ms. Bel might have rounded them up and is hoping no one will find out. Admittedly unlikely, but possible."

"Nathan met her. Do you want me to call him?"

Thomas shook his head. "I'll go visit Ms. Bel myself. I don't know; I just have a funny feeling about it. Good day, Ms. Ferris. Take care. I'll let you know if I find anything."

The drive out to the stone house was pleasant enough, but Thomas' wary feelings returned. He'd never heard of the house before, and before driving there, he had briefly returned to police headquarters to check the computer records there. He could find no trace of anything having been built there. No contractor's records, no zoning, no dates where any construction workers had been out there. A background check on Lilith Bel revealed no criminal record, but he did find that she had flown into Louisville, Kentucky once before, two years ago.

He felt a strong compulsion to find out all he could about her. Even if she had nothing to do with the Ferris case, there was something mysterious and sinister about her. People and houses simply didn't appear out of nowhere.

When he pulled up to the house, he found the gate closed and locked. Getting out of his car, he walked up to see if there was any call button. There was none, and he could see no car or garage either.

"Hello?" he shouted. "Police."

He took out his wallet and held up his badge in case anyone was watching from inside the house. No one answered him so he replaced the badge in his coat pocket, wondering what to do. He couldn't search the place without a warrant, of course, but he supposed taking a short walk around the premises wouldn't hurt.

So, he walked the length of the stone fence. Despite the shining of a late summer sun, he felt a slight chill in the air, as though the sunlight didn't want to shine here. He gazed at the house as he walked. In the side yard, he saw an outhouse and a well. Rather mundane objects compared to the rest of the place, but they explained where the recluse got her water. Travelling further along the wall, he saw no power lines, but did see a small generator where the tower portion of the house met the hallway. Clearly, the owner valued privacy immensely.

Making his way around, he looked at the portion of the yard that housed the barn. It was gray, weather-beaten, and looked as if it would fall over any minute. Behind it were apple trees that might once have been an attempt at an orchard, but they were wild and neglected now. He noticed something else, though. Several black goats were grazing on the lawn. They made no sounds,

and didn't look at him, but went about the barn in a detached, lethargic manner.

"Is there something the matter, officer?"

Thomas jumped and whirled around to find himself facing a large, powerfully built woman. She was carrying a small bag of groceries in her arms. The detective covered his annoyance at being snuck up on by remaining professional.

"I'm Detective Thomas, Oakwood Police Department," he told her, showing his badge a second time. "I was looking for the owner of this house."

"You've found her," Ms. Bel replied, setting her bag down. "I don't drive and have to walk into town every few days. When I returned from my latest errand, I saw your car. What did you want?"

The voice had only the slightest hint of challenge. "I wish to ask you a few questions, Ms. Bel. Do you remember a Michael Ferris?"

"Why yes. He and a Mr. Paxton helped me move in."

Her brow furrowed. "Is this about his death? A terrible thing, that. The newspaper called it a freak accident. Something about his truck breaking down and a pack of wild animals getting to him."

That was indeed what the paper had called it. The part about the breakdown had just been the journalist's guesswork. But Thomas thought it best not to tell her any more than he had to.

"Ms. Bel, you've been here over a week. Have you heard any sounds at night? Howls, running, that sort of thing? Have you seen any evidence of wild dogs?"

"No. But of course, that hardly means there aren't any."

Thomas licked his lips, weighing his next question carefully. "Ma'am, you'll forgive me, but in the past, I've had run-ins with people who wanted vicious breeds of dog for pets, but who didn't want to register them and pay the fees. I know that, among other things, you had crates delivered to you that seemed to contain animals. May I ask what they contained?"

Ms. Bel smiled faintly and waved her hand over the yard. "The goats you see were pets at a small farm I owned back home," she explained.

That would account for the crates, Thomas had to admit. But there was still something he didn't like about this whole place.

"Just out of curiosity, what prompted you to move here, of all towns?"

"Well sir, I've had a long and interesting life," she said. "Perhaps more so than you could imagine. One day,

I simply grew tired of it all. Everyone, I think, dreams of having the ability to simply walk away from the world. I had the means to do so."

"Where did you find this place?"

"I searched the papers in this area for several months until I saw the charity auction that sold the property to me. I had the house built myself, using private contractors from home. I know few people here, and just want to be left in peace."

"I see. Thank you for your cooperation. If you do see or hear anything that makes you suspect feral dogs, call the police or Animal Control."

"I will. Good day, Detective."

"Good day, Ms. Bel."

Thomas walked back around the fence row to his car in front. Lilith Bel waited until she heard him get in the

car and drive away. Then she turned her attention to the goats in her backyard.

She pointed at them with her right hand. The goats stopped moving. Their forms wavered and blurred to shadows. They grew, took on the shape of human shadows, and then passed into the tower through the wall. Ms. Bel smiled.

V

Helen Ferris called into work the next morning so she could take her son to the pediatrician. His fever had not improved, and he wasn't eating. Helen could have sworn that he was losing weight.

Picking him up, she walked outside and headed for her nearby car. Her neighbors were either still in bed or were going about their business quietly. They had

nothing to worry about, since none of their children were ill for no apparent reason. If only she could be so lucky.

As she buckled Mike Jr. into his car seat and got ready to drive, she noticed another woman walking down the street on the opposite side. The woman looked taller and stronger than any one she had ever seen before, and her footsteps sounded loudly on the sidewalk.

As she passed, she turned to gaze in Helen's direction. Briefly, their eyes met, and Helen felt a cold shiver down her spine. There was something in the woman's dark eyes that seemed to see into her very soul, something that saw past her defenses and considered her to be nothing. There was malice there, and arrogance. Somehow, Helen felt the woman could destroy her, but didn't consider her worth the effort.

With a slight smirk on her face, the woman turned and resumed her walk down the road. Frightened, Helen

got into her car and locked the door. When the woman finally turned a corner, Helen drove to the doctor by another route. She couldn't explain herself, but she felt unsafe, as though she were being stalked.

The visit to the doctor revealed little. Dr. Stephens could find nothing wrong with Mike, but confirmed that he was losing weight. She had prescribed an antibiotic and an antiviral for prophylaxis, but Helen felt she was just trying to humor her. She had heard that anti-influenza drugs were only of nominal help anyway. Still, if there was anything wrong with Mike's immune system…

She sighed and carried Mike back inside their home. She frowned as she shut the door and checked the thermostat. Why had it gotten colder over the afternoon?

She put Mike to bed, gave him the first dose of his medicine, and turned the heat up.

A knock came at the door, causing her to jump. Who could it be now? Nathan was busy at work, and none of their extended family visited often. She hesitantly opened her door, and was relieved to see Dr. Fowler.

"Helen, how are you?" he asked, concerned. "I haven't seen you since the funeral."

“Come in, Dr. Fowler," she answered, stepping aside so he could enter. She indicated a chair, and he sat down with a grateful nod.

"I'm still hurting," she confessed as she went into the kitchen. A few minutes later, she returned with two glasses of tea. Handing one to Fowler, she eyed him curiously. "Do you normally make house calls? Don't get me wrong, I'm glad to have a visitor and all."

"No, no, I understand," Dr. Fowler replied. He smiled slightly and took a sip of tea. “I was just in the area, and wanted to check on you. Mike was a friend, and I've been praying for you."

"I've been praying for myself a lot lately. And Mike was everybody's friend, more or less." She sat in the chair opposite him. The room still hadn't warmed up very much.

"Very true. Has Nathan been of any help to you?"

"Well, yes and no. He's been there for me, but I just have to get past it on my own. Nathan's actually said very little."

"No, he rarely does. He feels he has to do everything himself, even more than you do. That's his problem."

Helen nodded. From someone else, she would have been offended. But Fowler was only being honest, and she had known him long enough to trust him. It was

good to have someone with whom one could converse freely, without fear of hurting feelings.

"Nathan's loss isn't like mine, though," she told him. "Elaine was like Nathan, very quiet. She only showed her more adventurous side to him. I got along with her, but I didn't really know her. Mike, on the other hand, was very open. He never tried to hide anything."

She teared up slightly and had to wipe her eyes before continuing. "He was just so happy to be alive. I hate forced, phony cheerfulness, but Mike had none of that."

She took a drink of her tea before continuing. "It will just take a long time, that's all. I have my son to care for, and he's sick, so I have to worry about that now."

"I'm sorry," Fowler said sincerely.

"Do you understand what I'm trying to say?" she asked. "Did you ever have a family, apart from the professor’s?"

"No. My parents died of a wasting disease when I was still young. I've never been in love, but in hindsight, perhaps that was for the best. You could say that my calling in life is unique."

Before Helen could ask him what he meant by that, they were interrupted by coughing in the next room. The two went into Mike's bedroom to find the boy unable to sleep due to his sickness. Helen put a hand on his forehead, but Fowler drew back in shock.

"Helen...how long has he been like this?"

"Since the funeral. Why?"

"He looks like my parents before they died," Fowler whispered.

"Do you know what's wrong? Doctor, help me if you can."

Fowler shook his head and turned to leave. Helen followed him as he walked to the front door.

"I hope I'm wrong," he muttered. "I pray to God I'm wrong. Still, I knew she'd come for us eventually."

"What do you mean? What are you talking about?"

Fowler paused at the door and looked at her. His face had so much intensity that she took a step back.

"I'm going back to my office," he told her. "There's a book I need to consult. Then, I'll be right ack. Do not leave; stay with your son."

Then he left and practically ran down the street.

VI

That night, Nathan had another dream. This one seemed to begin where the previous one had ended, though he felt the presence of no shadowy figures at his

back. Instead, he was standing at the top of the stairs, gazing down at Elaine.

Elaine beckoned to him again and walked out the front door. As with the previous dream, he couldn't move until she was out of his sight. When he reached the outside of his house, he looked around for his wife. He saw her standing before a large oak tree in a corner of their front yard. The house and property he had inherited from her was large and fairly well secluded, so he had to walk several yards to reach her.

This time, she didn't keep moving, but let him approach her. She stared at him when he reached her, making no move to either get closer or travel further. For a moment, he just stood by her, looking at her up and down, so happy to see her again. She looked so perfect, so heavenly.

That thought gave him pause. Why was she here, in his dreams? Why wasn't she in heaven? For while he knew he was asleep, her presence felt too real, too vivid to be the figment of a lonely, heartbroken imagination.

Slowly, he reached out to her. She made no move to resist as they embraced. Her arms slipped around his neck as he kissed her. Tears ran down his face as he held her in his arms. It was a dream, but what did it matter? He was with his beloved again.

But after several minutes, she gently pulled away. Continuing to look at him intently, she knelt before the tree they were standing under. She motioned for him to do likewise, and for several more minutes, they knelt side by side under the canopy of leaves.

Elaine put her arm around him, and with her other hand, began to claw at the dust in front of them. From the look on her face, Nathan knew she was trying to tell

him something, but neither of them could speak. Whatever it was, it was of grave importance.

Suddenly, he woke up, and found himself in his room once more. This time however, he was not in his bed, but kneeling at his window with his face pressed against the glass. He frowned slightly, and groggily rose to his feet. Had he been sleepwalking?

As his head cleared, he saw that he was looking out over his large front yard. Elaine had taken him there in the dream, and while he couldn't see the exact tree, he remembered the spot she had been trying to point out to him. He began to wonder what was so special about that place. It almost seemed like she had been trying to reach something buried there.

He began to get dressed. Yes, that was what she had wanted. She wanted him to dig. He had no idea what he would discover but there was only one way to find out.

Dr. Fowler sat at his desk at church, pouring over a manuscript. His normal books remained shelved, for this particular volume he kept hidden in a locked drawer in his desk. There were only a handful of copies known to be in existence, and most had been in the hands of his family. Now that he was the last living member, the others had disappeared.

The English title of the book was Cult of the Inverted Kingdom. It was written by an unknown ancestor of his over fifteen hundred years ago, then translated into Latin by Roland de Beaumont, and into English by Charles under a pseudonym. Charles had always written his scholarly and other writings under

assumed names to keep their location secret. For the book told the history of how his family had faced their greatest enemy and her minions. This enemy had long sought to dominate the Earth with her sorcery; she possessed fell beasts and fell souls at her command.

He found the page he had been looking for, and began to read aloud.

"And when Nergal, the fell demon who fancied himself a god, did join forces with his servant, Inana, much evil spread throughout the world. When a skilled necromancer such as Inana called forth one of Nergal's spirit helpers, she could direct it to bring disease and death on anyone she wished."

He stopped reading aloud and skipped a few pages until he reached the ritual of exorcism. After reading it, he said a silent prayer that God Himself would give him

strength if his suspicions were true and he needed to use it.

Reaching for his phone, he tried to call Helen back. The phone continued to ring, and Fowler felt his nervousness mounting. He had told her to remain at home until he had finished his research. He hung up the phone and left his office with the book in hand.

He reached her house and knocked on the door urgently. There was no answer, so he kicked the door in. He walked inside, and could see his breath as he looked around the darkened living room.

He heard a slight moan, and ran into Mike's bedroom. The child's skin had turned ashen, and his breathing became shallow. Helen was sprawled on the floor, deathly pale herself. Her eyes fluttered open, and she looked at him pleadingly.

"I was right," Fowler said grimly. "I had hoped otherwise."

Helen looked at him questioningly, but she was too weak to stand or talk. Fowler opened the Cult of the Inverted Kingdom and began to read. His words were not in Latin, but in Sumerian, and called for the servant of Nergal to reveal itself.

As he read, the lights in Mike's room began to flicker. A dark man shaped shadow formed on a far wall. It said nothing, and made no sudden movements, but seemed to glower darkly at the minister. Helen seemed to gather enough strength to find her voice, for she screamed.

Fowler reached into his pocket and pulled out a wooden cross. Not a crucifix, as he wasn't a Catholic priest, but an image that invoked the power of the Savior nonetheless. The shadow flinched but held its ground.

"Begone! Return to the abyss, the place for your kind, and trouble the child no more!" Fowler cried in English, brandishing the cross. He then repeated the same command in the Sumerian he read in the book. The shadow tensed, and seemed ready to pounce like a wildcat.

"Begone!"

The spirit leaped at him, and Fowler fell backwards. But even on his back, he held the book and the cross, and the spirit couldn't harm him. Fowler felt the shade's mind touch his, blasting it with images. He saw a fierce dark eyed woman, strange hairy creatures, and his friends all jumbled together. He saw the target of the spirit's master. He saw Mike and Helen, and...Nathan.

The hold of the dark spirit seemed to wane, and it finally made noise. A low wail sounded throughout the house, and through Fowler's body, chilling his bones.

Then, it floated away from him, through the window, and out into the night.

Helen felt strength returning to her limbs. After Fowler had left, she had gone into Mike's room to check on him. Upon entering his room, she had been lying on the ground, watching Dr. Fowler facing a spirit.

She slowly stood up and walked over to the fallen minister. Kneeling down, she shook him, for he seemed frozen, clutching the objects he had used to repulse the specter. He had to live. Not only for his own sake, but he seemed to be the only person who understood what was happening.

Slowly, Fowler blinked, and his eyes came back into focus. He felt as though he had spent the last thirty minutes on a roller coaster, and was just now recovering his equilibrium. With a concerned look, Helen helped him to his feet.

"I'm all right, Helen," Fowler said, although he still staggered somewhat. "See to your son."

Helen did. Mike was still astonishingly asleep, having been affected most by the spirit. But some of the ashen color had left him, and his breathing had returned to normal. Moreover, his lungs sounded as though they were clearing.

She smiled and hugged Fowler in relief. "You saved him," she said, fighting back tears.

"Helen, whatever good you've found in me is there because of Him," Fowler answered, gently pulling away and holding up the cross.

She nodded and looked at him again. "Dr. Fowler, what is happening to my family?"

Feeling somewhat better now, Fowler left Mike's room for the living room. Helen followed as he picked up the phone on the coffee table. He still carried the book,

but made no attempt to show its contents to her; he felt he had little time.

"I saw the spirit's thoughts when it attacked me," he said quickly. "Both it and the monsters who killed your husband serve the same evil master, one who seeks to rule over all."

"Satan?"

"No, not him, but someone nearly as horrible in intent." She looked at him with a thousand questions in her eyes. "Not all fallen men and angels serve the Devil, although most do out of ear. Other, bolder ones try to create power for themselves. Selfishness and arrogance are the roots of evil; there is no friendship or camaraderie among the damned. This foe is a necromancer, a sorceress of great power who has been opposed by my family for generations."

"What do you mean? I don't understand; what does any of that have to do with us?"

"Nothing. I saw the spirit's intent. Mike's murder and your son's illness were meant to distract both the police and myself. She's really after Nathan."

"Nathan?" she echoed as Fowler began to dial the phone.

He nodded as he finished dialing the police department. "The late professor had something hidden on his property, something the necromancer needs. I don't have much time to explain; indeed, I don't know how much time I have at all."

Detective Edward Thomas sat at his desk, feeling utterly burned out. The Ferris case had come to a complete dead end. There were no traces of the animals

that had killed him, and despite his inward promise to solve the case, he had no idea what to do.

That had only unsettled him until he felt himself growing surly. He hadn't even slept well the last several nights. He hoped this wouldn't mean being reassigned to ticket writing.

His phone rang suddenly, interrupting his musings. "Detective Thomas, Oakwood Police," he answered.

"Detective? This is Dr. Fowler," a voice answered. "I have information on the Ferris case."

Thomas immediately sat up in his chair. "What do you know?" he demanded.

"I don't have long to explain. I'm at his widow's house now; she was attacked by a...well, we couldn't see more than a shadow. But we know that Nathan Paxton, her brother, is in danger too. Perhaps right now."

"What kind of danger? What are you trying to tell me?"

"As I said, no time. Please, Detective, come to 6100 Kive Street and take me to Paxton's house right away. I can tell where you need to go."

Thomas hesitated. The man wasn't cooperating with him, and he felt like someone was pulling a prank. But the minister did sound genuinely frightened, and Dr. Fowler was well known throughout the community. Indeed, if nothing else, he seemed too old for foolishness.

"Look, I've had a long week," Thomas warned. "I'm in no mood for stupid jokes."

"Sir, I swear it's no joke. Just come here, please."

Well, Thomas thought. I suppose if nothing else, it will break up the monotony.

"All right," he decided. "But if this is a hoax, you're in a lot of trouble."

A few minutes later, Dr. Fowler stood on the Ferris' front porch as a squad car pulled in the driveway. Helen was behind him in the doorway.

"Stay inside until sunrise," he told her as he walked to the waiting car. “I don't think she will try to harm you again now that I've seen through her ruse, but you never know."

Book and cross in hand, he entered the car, and was driven away.

VII

Nathan Paxton carried a shovel as he left his house to find the tree. The dream that was somehow not a dream had told him to search by digging. Somehow, he

knew that the answers to the strange goings on would be found there.

He set out by the clear moonlight. The air was warm, and not a breeze stirred. Not even the crickets could be heard chirping, as though nature itself was hushed in anticipation.

He reached the tree and felt a pang of sadness as he stood on the very spot where he and Elaine had kissed. He had always heard that ghosts were accompanied by coldness and the smell of decay, but that hadn't been his experience. Elaine had been as warm and soothing as a spirit as she had been in life.

He pushed the thought from his mind. For as important as Elaine was to him, he sensed that her message was more important still. He looked down on the patch of grass where they had knelt. By the moonlight, he began to dig.

He heard a door shut, and looked up. The houses here were three times as far apart as they were in the suburbs. Still, sometimes he could hear his neighbors from a distance. He squinted and saw that their lights were on. He shrugged and continued to dig.

He went down several feet, past the topsoil, and through nearly five feet of claylike dirt. Sweat poured from his brow, and he considered taking a short break. But then, he felt a jolt and heard a loud clang as his shovel finally hit something. He dug around it and uncovered a metal box about a foot long and wide. Was that what he was supposed to find? It had to be.

He lifted it up, finding that it contained something heavy. It took him three tries before he finally got it to the top of the hole and pulled himself out. For a few minutes, he lay on the ground, panting. He was normally

used to physical work, but it had been yet another long day, and he had slept poorly the past several days.

He heard the shuffling of feet. Sitting up, he looked around. In a nearby grove of tree, he thought he saw something scampering, but he blinked and it was gone. He had to get some sleep when all this was over.

He inspected the box. It was obviously old, but made of stainless steel. The lock that had once fastened the lid was not, however, and was so rusted that he was able to pry it off with relative ease. He took a deep breath and lifted the lid.

Inside was a stone tablet. Nearly filling the length of the box, he blinked in surprise, for it looked exactly like the ones Ms. Bel had, right down to the cuneiform inscriptions. Why did Elaine and her parents have this buried in their yard? Had the professor stolen it from

some museum? That seemed very unlikely, given his late teacher's honest disposition.

He stood up and picked up the box and shovel. He needed to get back inside and examine the tablet more closely. As he started back, he heard grunting and growling behind him. Looking back, he saw several dark shapes running towards him.

He cried out in fear and surprise. Remembering Mike's fate, he dropped the shovel and, clutching the box, made for his front door at a dead run. The creatures followed, but he had a good head start, and made it to the door before they reached him. He ran inside and slammed the door, locking it first, as the creatures angrily pawed at the wood.

He walked quickly through the dark living room to the stairwell. He needed to get as far away as he could.

Fumbling for a light switch at the base of the stairs, he finally found it and turned it on.

He looked up and nearly dropped the box. A hooded figure stood at the top of the stairs.

"Mr. Paxton," it said, in the voice of Lilith Bel.

Before Nathan could reply, Ms. Bel pointed at the door. It exploded, sending splinters all over the floor. He heard growling outside and saw four creatures moving in through the hole.

He had never seen anything so hideous. They stood about three feet tall, and were covered with shaggy, burnt smelling black hair. Their clumsy, clawed hands and feet made them move with a shuffling, apelike gait. They had no head at all. Instead, where the neck should have been was a large, lipless mouth filled with razor sharp teeth. Drool ran from the misshapen orifices as they advanced towards him, staining their fur.

Panicked, he ran behind the couch. As the monsters shuffled towards him with surprising speed, he pushed it at them. They shredded it with their claws. He tried to run out the door, but they ran over to block his way. He kicked one, but it bit him on the leg, making him scream and drop the box. He drew back and staggered into the kitchen, the creatures following him.

Running past his stove, he saw the back door a few feet away from him. Thinking quickly, he picked up a frying pan from the burner. One of the monsters came to him, and stretched a clawed hand forward. Nathan swung the pan, smashing the hand with all of his strength.

The creature howled, and doubled over. Nathan swung the pan again, and heard a gruesome but satisfying crunch as he hit the creature's back. It fell,

and the other three paused, giving him just enough time to run out the door.

He winced as he moved, still feeling blood trickle down his leg form the bite. Briefly, he wondered what type of diseases the beasts carried, but he needed to get out of here before he could worry about that.

He didn't understand why the monsters had been sent after him. Nor why Ms. Bel apparently controlled them. The only thing that made sense was that she wanted the tablet he had unearthed. But right now, he had to get back around front. He had to get to his car. He had to do something, anything, to get out of this nightmare.

He felt something grip his already bleeding ankle, and he fell facedown into the dirt. The pan left his hand, and went flying off into the dark. He looked over his shoulder, and was greeted by a growling creature. The

other two were approaching as well. He closed his eyes and hoped it would be quick.

Suddenly, he felt a light hit his face and heard sirens screaming. He looked up and saw a police car pulling into his driveway. The creature let go of his ankle, and with its fellows behind it, ran to face this new, unexpected foe. Thankfully, as Nathan realized, the things had no conscious minds, nor even the instincts of most animals. Unless directly controlled by their master, they only had blind, unfocused rage.

Two of the creatures jumped on the hood of the moving car. Tires screamed as the car swerved into the front yard. Driving wildly, it finally managed to throw the creatures off. They hit the ground, stunned.

The door opened, and Nathan saw Detective Thomas jump out, pistol in hand. Dr. Fowler, to his surprise, jumped out the other side. The third creature rushed at

them, but Thomas fired three times, and the monster crumpled.

Nathan staggered to his feet, and Dr. Fowler ran up to him. "Nathan, are you all right?"

"Doctor, it's Ms. Bel," he gasped in reply. "She broke in and attacked me with those things."

"You're hurt," the minister observed. He reached into his pocket, pulled out a handkerchief, and bandaged the bite on his leg.

Thomas, meanwhile, went over to the creature he had shot. Bending down, his face contorted in disgust between the smell and appearance. He cautiously prodded it with the barrel of his gun. The pistol went into the thing, and he pulled it out in shock. Black blood covered his gun.

He looked on as the area around the creature's wounds began to grow. The thing seemed to be

collapsing from within, as though the inside had crumbled. The skin and hair dissolved as well, sending up a cloud of foul vapor. When it cleared, there were only a few hairs and bloodstains left on the spot.

Thomas stood up and looked at his car. The other creatures had regained consciousness. He brandished his gun, but they ran off into the night instead of attacking again. Fowler and Nathan came up behind him, so he immediately faced the minister.

"All right," he said tensely. "I believe you now. Those things were what killed Mike Ferris, weren't they?"

"Yes. I'm sure of it," Fowler said sadly.

"Listen, I want some answers," Thomas said. "What exactly is going on?"

"Let's find out where Ms. Bel went," Nathan said. "I think she was trying to steal the thing I found in our yard."

"What thing?" Fowler asked urgently. "Did you find the tablet?"

"Yes, but how did you know?"

Fowler didn't reply, but he ran into the smashed front doorway. Nathan and Thomas followed. They saw the shredded couch and metal box. Fowler ran to it and, finding it empty, kneeled down and put his head in his hands. He let out a low moan as though he'd been shot.

Thomas drew his gun again and walked up the stairwell. Nathan doubted if Ms. Bel would still be there, but the detective never left anything to chance when he could help it. Nathan checked the kitchen, but he only found the dissolved remains of the other creature.

When he returned to his living room, he found that Fowler hadn't moved. Thomas came back downstairs, putting the gun away as he did so.

"There's no one here," he confirmed. "But the upstairs have been ransacked."

“She found what she was looking for,” Fowler said. “God forgive me; I wasn’t fast enough. I should’ve been more vigilant.”

“You knew something and didn’t say, Doctor?” Nathan asked.

Fowler nodded. “Sit down, you two. I must tell you everything. We have a little time yet, but not much.”

He went back to the police car. Thomas and Nathan looked at each other warily, and then went to sit down on some easy chairs the creatures didn’t touch.

Presently, Fowler returned with the old book he had carried for the past few hours. “This book is the Cult of the Inverted Kingdom,” he said. “It is a record of rebellion against God himself and how my ancestors opposed it. Nathan, you took Professor Beaumont’s

class. He taught his students about the legends of Inana and Nergal."

"Yes. He seemed fascinated by the legend of the goddess descending into the underworld," Nathan remembered. "What of it?"

"Nathan, it's no legend," Fowler whispered. "There was a being named Nergal. A demon or some kind of supernatural entity. One who devoured other souls, and made them part of himself. He dwelled in a place called the Inverted Kingdom. Not heaven or hell, but some realm separate from both or from Earth."

"That's crazy," Thomas interrupted. He wanted to track down whoever owned the monsters, not hear obscure legends.

"You said you believe in the creatures you saw, Detective," Fowler answered, unperturbed. "Though they are of flesh and blood, you will never find them in the

wild. They are called prowlers, and are bred not by natural means, but by sorcery.”

“We’re getting off track,” Nathan said.

“The next part of the story concerns Inana,” Fowler replied. “Be patient, and the connection will become clear.

“She was not a goddess, as the legends said, but a human warrior queen who ruled Apsu, a city state older than the oldest Sumerian communities. She grew obsessed with increasing her own power. She conquered outside peoples, delved into sorcery, and created the Me’ tablets, one of which you found. She discovered how to create the prowlers and turn them on her foes.

“Still, she wished for more. So she descended into the Inverted Kingdom, Nergal’s domain, with the intention of challenging him. No one knows for sure what happened, but neither was able to defeat the other.

So, Nergal, made a deal with her instead. He would grant her immortality if she would use her Me’ tablets to bring his servants into the world. For Nergal, at that point, was trapped, and wanted to escape.

“With her new ally, Inana embarked on a campaign to bring all the new race of men under her power. Her armies were strong, and her prowlers fearsome. The damned souls she could conjure up were unable to cause physical damage, but they would induce sickness and fatigue. Many died from their plagues.”

“If they were so powerful, how were they ever stopped?” Nathan asked. Oddly, he felt no temptation to doubt a story that most would find insane. He felt the truth of Fowler’s words and meeting the ghost of his wife had dispelled any lingering doubts that the dead could, on occasion, journey beyond the grave.

“It grew beyond the world’s ability to tolerate. Men fought back. The war with Inana was so great and terrible that no records survived other than the oral traditions put down in this book. What finally turned the tide was a betrayal. One of Inana’s handmaidens was captured by a captain of the resistance. She fell in love with him, and for his sake, helped him gain entrance into Inana’s city. In the final battle, the handmaiden stole the central Me’ tablet. It served as dowry for her marriage to the captain.”

“Why not simply destroy it?” Thomas asked. “Why the business of stealing and hiding something that this… Inana could always recover?”

Fowler pursed his lips in thought. “I don’t know what exactly happened after the war ended. Apsu was, of course, destroyed and she lost most of her power, but somehow, she managed to survive. Her natural physical

strength, intelligence and cleverness remained, as did her ability to create prowlers. Most of her skill with calling up the dead vanished when the central Me' tablet was stolen from her, but she still had the other six, and can bring forth ghosts from a distance. She can blast nonliving objects into dust but, thankfully, not human flesh.

"My ancestors decided on a dangerous gambit. If they destroyed the tablet, she would still remain. But if they kept it hidden, gave her hope that she could recover it, they would not only distract a great deal of her energies, but might even draw her out into a final conflict."

"But you said she was immortal," Nathan protested.

"Only in the sense that she doesn't age," Fowler corrected. "She is still human. Therefore, she is as

vulnerable to injury or illness as any of us. That is why she has kept herself as hidden as my family.

“Long years passed. As men began to spread and repopulate the Middle East, the central Me’ tablet was kept by my direct ancestors. It passed from generation to generation over the millennia, until only two descendants remained of the handmaiden’s firstborn. They were myself, and Professor Beaumont.

“Inana appeared again to prey upon men and corrupt them. It was she who encouraged the legends about her and Nergal being gods.”

A silence followed, and Dr. Fowler looked gravely at his two friends. “You both know everything now. We need to stop Inana. It will take her a few hours to prepare the ritual, but we need to get moving. Can you get us weapons, Detective?”

“Yes,” Thomas answered. In spite of his earlier skepticism, the sincerity of Fowler and the presence of the prowlers convinced him.

“We will need guns, and if you can manage, dynamite. Inana will position the tablets over an altar, and open a doorway to the Inverted Kingdom. The tablets will need to be destroyed by natural means as the exorcism is the only ‘spell’ in this book. ‘Magic’ is of the devil, anyway, not of God.”

They stood up and silently made their way through the ruined living room to the waiting police car. Climbing in, they drove back into town. It was late, and there was no traffic as they made their way through the town square to the police station.

“We have received a strange blessing,” Fowler muttered, breaking the silence. “Inana didn’t kill us when she could have. In her overconfidence, she has left

herself venerable. By the way, Nathan, the professor had buried the tablet. I didn't know where it was on your property. How did you find it?"

"It was in my dreams, Doctor. I was having a reoccurring dream involving Elaine leading me somewhere. Each night, it went a little further." Nathan looked at the minister. "It was no dream. It was her; I see now she was trying to get me to take the tablet away. But I dropped it like an idiot back there."

"You were being attacked by prowlers. That would unnerve most people." Fowler sighed. "But you are not the only one who made a mistake. Perhaps I should have told you all this earlier. When the epidemic hit two years ago, I myself fell ill. I thought for sure it was Inana, but then I recovered and there were no more attacks until now. She didn't come right away, and I allowed myself to assume it was all a tragic coincidence."

Thomas remembered something he had discovered earlier. “Inana did come here two years ago,” he told them. “At first, I thought it was just to scout the area. But maybe she was trying to slow you down in the process.”

“Probably true,” Fowler answered. “And to make us suffer. She has been filled with rage for longer than most civilizations have lasted. She would have relished our pain. Unfortunately, my over cautiousness is as much to blame as Nathan’s fear.”

They pulled into the police station. Getting out of the car, Thomas led them around to the back door. He was hoping to do what he needed to do quietly; the fewer witnesses to ask questions, the better. They walked down a hall and entered a door on the right.

The evidence room had countless weapons and other stolen merchandise lining the shelves. Thomas visibly scanned them, and pulled two shotguns down.

“These are from a robbery several months ago,” he said offhand. “The case is closed, but I’m not supposed to remove them. Fortunately, there should be no reason for anyone to check anytime soon.”

Fowler took one. “Nathan can’t shoot,” he told the detective.

“How is it a minister knows?”

Fowler shrugged. “I like to skeet shoot on occasion. It’s no sin, you know.”

In spite of the night’s events, Thomas smiled slightly. He pulled a stick of dynamite and a lighter from another shelf. These he handed to Nathan.

“Keep that hidden under your shirt,” Thomas told him.

Nathan did as he was told and looked at the lighter before he pocketed it. “It’s Mike’s,” Nathan murmured. “Appropriate.”

VIII

The drive out to the house at the edge of town was tense, but uneventful. Thomas pulled the car off the road about a mile away, and turned to his new friends.

“I say we walk from here. We don’t want to attract any more attention than we have to.”

The others nodded, and they slowly got out of the car. It was midnight now, and a full moon hung overhead. Walking side by side, the three walked slowly down the road. Fowler and Thomas stood on either side of Nathan, holding their shotguns. The air was warm, but they shivered with fear and trepidation.

Suddenly, the bleating of a goat sounded out, causing them to jump and whirl around. A goat stood on

the road, solid black in color. A very faint red glow could be seen in its eye.

Thomas tensed and began to raise his weapon. He didn’t like the looks of the animal. Two more bleats reached their ears, and they turned to find two more goats facing them from the front. They had seemingly come out of nowhere. They made no overtly threatening moves, but they also didn’t back away when the trio took one hesitant step forward.

More goats suddenly appeared, both to the right and to the left. They hadn’t come out of the woods, neither had they exactly materialized. They just found themselves surrounded on all sides by the things. Their eerie calls pierced the darkness in a kind of grotesque harmony, as if they were singing. Or laughing.

Nathan began to cough, and he felt a cold sweat break out on his brow. His throat began to get a tickle in

it, and his body ached all over. He felt fatigue begin to grip him. Slowly, he began to kneel in front of the attackers.

Why fight any more, he thought. It was pointless to think he could really do anything. *I'm so tired of living. I want to be with Elaine.*

Elaine! She had wanted him to fight, he realized. These thoughts weren't his. The 'goats' were doing something to him. He looked right and left and saw the others affected as well.

"Doctor," he managed to whisper hoarsely.

Dr. Fowler seemed to rise up out of his stupor. Fumbling in his pocket, he pulled out the wooden cross. The goats saw it and hesitated. The sounds stopped, and they felt their fatigue and despair begin to ebb away.

They stood up, and the goats then resumed their bleating, sounding angrier. They felt their throats tighten

with induced sickness, but Fowler held the cross high, silencing them again. The minister took a step forward and brandished the cross at the two blocking their path. The goat's forms wavered, became like humanoid shadows, and vanished. He held the cross at the others on either side, making them cower back into the trees. They sounded despairing as they too changed and dissolved. After repeating this in all directions, they found themselves on the road alone.

With a wary glance at each other, the trio resumed their journey. A light could be seen at the end of the road, and they knew that they were close. The sick feelings had left them now.

A low growl pierced the darkness, and as they approached the open gate, two prowlers ran out. Whether they were the same ones they had faced earlier was hard to tell, as they had no individual features.

Thomas pointed his shotgun at the first one and fired. The prowler fell, and a shot from Fowler ended the life of the second one. By the time they reached the gate, the two prowlers had already disintegrated.

They went into the courtyard, expecting to find more prowlers, but none challenged them. The house was shut, but lights were on, especially in the tower section at the back. Though Nathan hadn't actually seen that room, he was pretty sure that was where they would find Inana.

Suddenly, more growls could be heard in the backyard of the house. From a low opening at the base of the tower, prowlers were emerging. Thomas turned to the others.

"I'll take care of them. You two go inside. Try to find an open window."

The police detective ran towards the prowlers, who retreated for the ruined barn. The other two men went to the front window. Warily reaching out, Nathan pressed up on the glass. To his surprise, the window slid open without any effort. The two glanced at each other. It seemed too easy to quietly sneak inside with only a minimal amount of trouble.

Nathan slowly put one leg inside the house and crawled in. Too easy or not, to do nothing would be to give in. Either way, Inana had the advantage, so the only thing to do was find an advantage of their own.

Once inside, Nathan reached out the window, took the shotgun from Dr. Fowler, and helped the minister in. They were in the parlor anteroom, a place that was almost surreal in its normality given all that they had faced. A couch was beside them; several chairs and a grandfather clock stood in the opposite part of the room.

There was no television or computer; clearly Inana neither had use nor understanding for such things.

The room was bathed in a red light, and everything was deathly still. Handing the gun back to Fowler, Nathan began to walk to the middle of the room where the main hallway began. Fowler touched his arm and stopped him. Silently, he handed the cross to Nathan, who nodded in understanding. They were expecting him to destroy the Me' tablets. If anyone needed the help, it would be him.

They peered around the corner to the hall. The same red light shone there and all the doors, both on the sides and end of the hallway, were shut. Nathan did notice one difference from the time he had been here before, though. The two lion statues with the manlike heads had been moved to the center of the hallway. They seemed to

be guarding it, but that was nonsense. They were only statues.

Continuing to walk close together, Nathan and Fowler moved slowly down the hallway, staying focused on the door. Neither liked the quiet of the house, nor the unnatural lighting, but knew no other course of action. They reached the statues, half expecting them to do something. But they did nothing. Slowly, the pair stopped in the space between the stone guardians.

They fell into blackness.

At first, Nathan wasn't sure what happened to him. He had felt the ground give way under his feet, and then he was in complete darkness. *No, wait,* he thought. *Not complete.* There was a dim light above him.

Looking up, he saw the hole where they had fallen about fifteen feet. He silently cursed himself for not being more careful. He had been expecting a

supernatural attack and instead had been taken in by a natural trapdoor.

His leg throbbed in pain from where he had fallen on it. It was already weakened from where a prowler had bitten into it. Now, when he tried to stand, a jolt of pure agony seized him. He cried out and sank back down to the floor.

“Nathan, don’t move if you’re hurt,” he heard Fowler’s voice call out. “Let me come to you.’

“I…think I broke my leg,” Nathan answered through clenched teeth. He still had the cross and held it tightly in one hand.

“I’m bruised, but I’ll live,” Fowler replied. “I still have my gun. I must not have fallen as hard as you.”

Suddenly, red light flooded the room. Neither could tell where it came from, but it served to show them their current location. They were in a circular brick room,

several feet in diameter. There were no windows or furniture, but there was an open doorway with stairs at the far side of the wall.

The room also contained nearly a dozen prowlers.

Detective Thomas ran to the barn at the end of the clearing. The door was shut, and a red light came through the cracks in the ruined boards. The door had no lock, but Thomas kicked it open anyway and stepped inside, holding his shotgun.

Abandoned stables lined either side of the interior. In the middle, a fire blazed and a hooded figure knelt by the flames. Thomas blinked; surely Inana wasn't out here, waiting for him.

He pointed the gun at the crouching shape. "Don't move," Thomas shouted.

The figure ignored the warning and stood up. It shrugged off the robe, and Thomas saw that it was actually one of the prowlers. It growled and lumbered towards him, but he shot it down before it could get close enough to attack. He walked to the fire just as it dissolved.

More growls sounded, and Thomas whirled around to see more prowlers come out of one of the empty stables. They blocked the door, and Thomas saw no other way out. He held up his gun, determined to fight.

Fowler, who was almost beside Nathan, raised his gun. With a quick backward glance at his friend, he made sure that Nathan still had the cross and nodded. Then he slowly stepped to about the middle of the room.

The prowlers growled menacingly, drool staining the fur below their headless mouths. Then three rushed the

minister. He shot them in quick succession without even thinking. A few more ran around the room to Nathan, but he held the cross up, hoping that it would affect them the way it did the spirits.

It worked. The prowlers growled more loudly, but didn’t approach them any further, and Fowler whirled around to shoot them before they did any damage. Still more of the monsters came forward, and Fowler continued to shoot until he ran out of ammunition. But some of the creatures remained, and Fowler was forced to swing his empty gun like a club. He pounded one creature after another, but only held them back. Like a pack of wild dogs, they were angry and wanted his blood.

As Nathan watched the small battle, he felt something else happen. He began to feel dizzy and weak. He clasped his hands together over the cross, almost

instinctively, but his palms were cold and clammy to the touch. He tried to take a deep breath, but it was becoming harder to breathe. He wondered if these feelings were another attack on them by the spirits, but Fowler seemed unaffected.

Then, he realized what the matter was. A memory stirred, and he recalled studying first aid in his local scout troop as a teenager. The injury to his leg had stressed his body to the point that his organs were not getting enough blood circulating to them. He was going into shock.

As he realized what was going on, the prowlers seemed inspired by a sudden idea. All but one of their number rushed for Fowler’s legs. They forced him against one side of the room. He was able to beat some of them off, but the others bit into his shins, leaving large gashes. Fowler screamed and crumpled, and the

one prowler who had stayed behind took advantage of the situation to leap on the doctor’s back.

Fowler thought quickly and rammed his back against the wall, trying to stun the creature. But the monster was too strong and grabbed his neck. With one swift motion, it savagely twisted and broke the minister’s neck. Then it sank its teeth into the nape to finish the already dying man.

Nathan could only gaze on the scene in horror. His friend died. All hope left him. The monsters turned from their defeated enemy, and advanced on him.

But then, he heard footsteps. His head swimming from the advancing shock, Nathan looked at the doorway. Inana, still clad in the hooded cloak, came down. The prowlers directed their attention to her, and she gestured to the doorway with one hand. Single file, they moved past her, up the stairs and out of sight.

Inana walked through the now empty pit to the body of Fowler. Despite the fatigue on her face, she smiled thinly. She had won. The last descendant of her ancient enemies was lying at her feet. Very soon, she would once more cover the earth with darkness. Those who opposed her would sicken and die, and the prowlers would feed on their corpses.

She then took notice of Nathan. Walking over to him, she studied his face with something like grudging respect. The mover scowled at the killer of his wife, friend, parents, and half the town.

“You dare much, Nathan Paxton,” she told him. “But it is finished. The ritual is nearly complete. You know what I speak of. He…” her eyes blazed as she pointed at Fowler’s body, “…no doubt told you everything.”

He gripped the cross tightly. Inana noted it, and a brief flash of recognition appeared in her eyes, making

her take one small step back. Her tone then changed, and her face softened, just slightly. “Why not join me? You are dying, but I can use those who have intelligence and courage. The spirits will kill you when the door is opened, but I could protect you.”

Nathan knew she was just toying with him; he wanted no power and influence in the world and she knew it. Even if he wanted to believe her, the only thing he would have wanted would be to have his loved ones back. To answer her proposal, he spat at her. He had hoped to hit her in the face, but his head swam again, and it only hit her boots. Inana looked at the insult, shrugged, and walked back up the steps, leaving him alone.

Nathan had lost everything now, including his chance to defeat the evil plaguing his town. Indeed, the whole world was on the brink of ending, though none but

he and Thomas knew it. He felt the bundle under his jacket. Yes, the stick of dynamite was still there. Inana had once again spared him, although whether because of the cross or her own arrogance, he couldn’t say. Perhaps it was a little of both.

Then, Elaine appeared before him. He looked up, weakly, wanting to apologize, wanting to tell her that they would be together soon enough, but he couldn’t speak. She reached out to him. Nathan, tottering on the brink of unconsciousness, reached back. She lifted him to his feet, her look one of love and determination.

As she supported him, he walked slowly and quietly to the stairway, despite his broken leg. She vanished, but he still felt her presence. He could feel Elaine strengthening him, but he had to do the last step himself. They walked up a few steps, and came into a large circular chamber. A quick glance to the right revealed

the door at the end of the house's hallway and confirmed that he had come to the tower.

Inana was there, her back to him. She stretched her hands over a stone altar. The seven Me' tablets had been placed on it; he saw the tablet he had found only a few hours ago there in the center. It seemed a lifetime ago already.

Inana was chanting in a language he had never heard before, and he looked around the room. By the torchlight, he saw dozens of dark spirits hovering in the high space above him, for the roof was several stories up.

Near the roof, Nathan saw mists gathering. They seemed almost to form a door, but the boundaries wavered. Nathan thought he saw glimpses of a cavern through the misty portal, a cavern where the ceiling glowed red, as though fire or magma lay behind it. As

the image focused in and out, he could just make out the lines of a black ziggurat, that form of temple favored by the Babylonians and other Middle Eastern peoples.

He had only a little time. Looking to the left, he saw the small hole in the wall, where the prowlers had exited. He saw none of them now, and realized that they had probably been sent out to finish Thomas. Briefly he wondered what had become of the brave man, but had heard neither shots nor screams from the yard.

Led by Elaine’s presence, Nathan took out the stick of dynamite. Reaching into his pocket, he pulled out Mike’s lighter, lit the explosive, and ran around the perimeter of the room. He felt only half aware of what he was really doing, but continued to move forward.

Inana, of course, saw him, and cried out in both anger and surprise. She tried to run after him, but he felt himself throwing the stick over her head and diving

through the hole. The dynamite hit the altar and exploded.

Rolling over on his side, Nathan peered through the hole back into the room. The altar, with its tablets, had been blasted into rubble. The misty portal wavered and no clear image could now be discerned. The floating spirits, seeming to know that their scheme had failed, were flying down from the ceiling back into the door.

Then, his gaze went to Inana, and he shuddered. She had been trying to catch him, so had been away from the main blast. But the heat and force of the explosion had burned her skin and ripped away much of the robe. Debris had hit her, causing her to bleed where the skin hadn’t been charred. Her eyes were closed, and her breathing was shallow and irregular. As the last of the spirits entered the portal, it collapsed, and the one who had called it forth breathed her last.

Nathan watched, fascinated, as the corpse began to change. The hair turned grey, and the already damaged skin seemed to dry out and flake away. Presently, he found himself gazing on a mummy, someone who might have been dead thousands of years rather than mere moments. At last, even this crumbled, leaving only a tattered robe and a few piles of dust.

Elaine had watched all this time as well, unseen. She seemed to watch Inana's final dissolution and then depart. Nathan felt weakness returning as the shock, held at bay, now threatened to overwhelm him. He heard someone call his name, and turned to see Thomas running towards him. He came from the barn, and Nathan saw several prowler remains around the door. Then, he lost all consciousness. It was past midnight, but morning was several hours away.

IX

Nathan woke up in a clean bed in a comfortable room. Looking around, he recognized from the furnishings that he was in a hospital room. His leg was in a cast and he was receiving intravenous fluids and antibiotics.

He looked over and saw Helen sitting in a chair. She didn’t see him at first, as she was skimming over a book; the Cult of the Inverted Kingdom. She then looked up, and seeing that he was awake, smiled in relief.

She shut the book and came over to him, laying her hand on his shoulder. “Just relax,” she said. “Everything is going to be all right.” She pointed to the book she had left by her chair. “I know everything now. Detective Thomas gave me that book when they admitted you.”

She looked down. “Dr. Fowler, he sacrificed himself for us, didn’t he?”

Nathan nodded slightly, his mind going back to that long and terrible night. “How long have I…”

“You’ve been unconscious for three days. I’ve had to have our employees fill in for us in the meantime. We’ve probably lost some business, but that doesn’t matter.”

She picked up the telephone at his nightstand and dialed a number. “Detective Thomas? Helen Ferris. Nathan is awake, and you can question him now. Okay, thanks. Goodbye.”

“Question me?” Nathan echoed.

She nodded. “He’ll explain when he gets here.”

They talked for almost twenty minutes before Detective Thomas came into the room. He shut the door, pulled the chair up, and sat at Nathan’s side. Helen leaned back against the wall to listen.

Thomas’ grim face broke into an uncharacteristic smile when he saw Nathan awake. “Thank God. No one

else will die now because of all this. How are you, Paxton?”

“Tired, but I’ll be fine,” Nathan answered. “What happened after I blacked out?”

“I had no choice but to call an ambulance and backup officer,” Thomas said. “I would have wanted to keep the whole thing secret, but you were hurt and I didn’t see Fowler. As it turned out, once we got you on the way to the hospital, the deputy and I found him dead.”

Thomas shook his head before continuing.

“I gave my report early the morning after. I told my colleagues that I had been patrolling when I heard gunshots and went to investigate. That was believable; I have a patrol that takes me to the edge of town anyway. I told them that I’d found you and radioed for backup. We investigated the house and found Fowler dead, along

with several traces of hair and bone where the prowlers had been.

“We also investigated the tower, but only found a tattered rag, dust and some rubble in the center. I told them that ‘Lilith Bel’ must have lied about keeping dangerous animals and that it looked as though she was into the occult. I concluded that you and Fowler went to investigate her, and tried to take the law into your own hands.”

Thomas looked at him. “I’m supposed to be questioning you to verify that,” he told him. “Since there is a connection to the Ferris case, I was put in charge of this investigation, too. You will confirm what I told them.”

“Of course,” Nathan replied.

“Fortunately, her powers seem to have died with her,” Thomas said. “That morning, after filing my initial

report and giving a brief call to Ms. Ferris here, I went home. I've probably slept almost as much as you have. I've never had such a long night before and hope I never will again.

"Meanwhile, the police confiscated everything in the house. This morning, I looked over the books and manuscripts from her library. There were several volumes, some quite old, on just about every subject you can imagine. Oddly enough, though, I saw very little that might be considered occult."

"Of course not," Helen said grimly. "According to this book of Fowler's you gave me, she had direct access to this other realm. She probably had no need of books or magical objects or anything like that. Apart from the tablets, I mean."

“What few spells she did need, she seemed simply to know,” Nathan agreed. “Let’s only hope no one else will ever learn them. So, Detective, what happens now?”

Thomas stood up. “I’m going to tell them that you confirmed my suspicions,” he replied. “You and Dr. Fowler decided to investigate yourself, and found Ms. Bel’s pack of wild dogs. You tried to attack, but were nearly killed, and Ms. Bel escaped. I’ll put out a wanted bulletin on the news but, of course, no one will ever find her.

“As for you, while you should have let the police handle things, I’m going to recommend probation for you as you’ve been punished enough.”

He got up, shook Nathan’s hand, and left the room. Helen sat down on the vacated chair, and took her brother’s hand.

“He’s right,” she said. “It’s already been in the papers. In spite of everything, there will probably be rumors. But her secrecy will work to our advantage; very few people even met Ms. Bel, so no one will seriously contradict the story.” She paused thoughtfully. “We’ve been lucky to have people like the detective and doctor on our side.”

“It was more than luck,” Nathan said. He pointed to the nightstand, where Fowler’s wooden cross lay. Helen understood.

Epilogue

It was several weeks before Nathan was healed enough to be discharged. In the ensuing weeks, Helen had had his door replaced and cleaned up the house from where it had been ransacked. Still, when he got

home, it seemed as though a lifetime had passed. He really didn't know where to go from here.

Dr. Fowler's funeral was held while he was still in the hospital. Nevertheless, he and Helen had been bombarded with questions. They had stuck to the story Thomas had given them, careful not to embellish it any more than they had to. They didn't want people to suspect the darker truth. Indeed, some of their congregation became angry with them, but Nathan only repeated Thomas' statement that he had been punished enough.

Well, he thought ruefully, *if that means I'm branded an eccentric, so be it. It's a small price to pay, all things considered.*

He worried a little bit more over the fact that he would be losing some business. His assistants had done their best, but the loss of Mike and his long recovery

would still mean fewer jobs. He worried about that more from the standpoint of his young nephew, but figured that somehow, they would be provided for.

He looked at his watch. It was almost time for his first ‘probationary’ meeting with the detective. He had picked an unusual spot for it.

The cemetery in front of Oakwood Community Church tended to be empty during the week. On this particular day, it was bathed in sunlight, belaying the gloom usually associated with such locales. Nathan stood with the support of a crutch overlooking two graves. Helen and Thomas stood behind him.

They had already placed flowers over the grave of Dr. Fowler. Now he did the same for Mike and Elaine. Silently, he thanked them for all they had done and tried

to do. After lingering for a moment, the three headed back to their car.

As he walked, Nathan felt some questions nagging at his mind. They may have stopped Inana, but was that really the end? What of the Inverted Kingdom, that strange satellite kingdom of hell? Were there other ways to reach it? What of Nergal? If he could still come to the world of the living, Nathan doubted that he would show any mercy.

Helen helped him into the back seat, as he and Thomas got in the front. He looked at the seat next to him. He had brought the picture of himself and Elaine with him. Silently, he said his last goodbye to her. The past was over; it was time to move on.

Necromancer 2: the awakening

Moonlight lit the secluded forest road. There was a stillness in the air and a chill that couldn't be explained entirely by temperature. No wind rustled in the leaves of the trees that flanked either side of the road, but the air seemed alive with the movement of things unseen.

At one end of the pathway, two headlights suddenly came into view. They grew steadily until the shape behind them revealed itself as a police car for the nearby town of Oakwood, Indiana. The car stopped on the road and three men came out.

Only one was an officer, a black man with a shaved head and mustache. The other men were two civilians, an old man with glasses and a younger, sadder looking man carrying a sort of bundle under his jacket. The policeman and old man carried shotguns.

Looking warily at each other, the three walked side by side down the dark, moonlit road. Their manner was grim, yet resolved. They had come here with some clear purpose, but what exactly couldn't be determined by merely looking at them.

Suddenly, a bleating sound disturbed the stillness. Looking up, the three found themselves confronted by a

large black goat that had apparently come out of nowhere. Its eyes gleamed faintly in the dark, and its stance challenged the men.

More calls sounded behind them, and other goats appeared on either side. Soon goats surrounded them completely. They continued to call, almost mockingly, and the three began to cough and tremble. Slowly, they dropped to their knees.

An alarm blared, jolting Lavinia Matheson out of her slumber.

She moaned and, stretching out her pale hand, fumbled for the alarm ringing on her nightstand. Her fatigued limbs finally managed to find the button that shut off the noise and she grunted in satisfaction.

Reluctantly, she sat up, and looked at herself in the mirror perched on top of her dresser. Even in the

morning, she disliked what she saw. Pale skin, grey eyes, plain features and straight blond hair that she couldn't do anything with. So, she had stopped trying years ago, and let it hang straight down to her shoulders.

She had just graduated high school two months ago, but the memories remained. She had been one of the very rare students to actually skip a grade, and was looking at college before she was eighteen. But because of her appearance, she had been teased as a child and largely ignored as an adolescent. Consequently, she grew up quiet, withdrawn, and introspective. Odd dreams like the one she had just had were no stranger to her.

She stood, stretched, and walked over to her closet to select her outfit for the day. Of course, this dream had an additional characteristic that set it apart from the other ones. She had dreamed it twice before. Moreover, there was something about the men, particularly the sad

looking one, which touched the edge of her memory. She couldn't help but find something familiar about it.

She dressed, and left her room, her brow furrowing as she descended the staircase at the end of the hall. She couldn't think of where or how she would have met the stranger. He appeared several years older, so she couldn't have gone to school with him. He wasn't a relative, and the only real friend she had was Mike Ferris, Jr., the son of her mother's friend, Helen.

Of course, she thought. That explained it. Mike was over two years younger than her, but he had the same blue eyes as the stranger, the 'Paxton' eyes as he called them. Helen's maiden name had been Paxton, he explained, and she had bright blue eyes as well. Somehow, her subconscious mind must have worked them into the dream.

She smiled slightly, the thought of Mike offsetting the foreboding nature of the dream. Mike had such a friendly, easygoing demeanor, that everyone who knew him liked him. She sometimes suspected that he had a crush on her, but always dismissed the notion as ridiculous. She wasn't particularly attractive, and was too thin for her height. Besides, Mike's younger age set them worlds apart at this stage in their lives. He was still in school; she had a summer job to earn money for college.

As she walked into the kitchen, the sound of the small television on the table drove out all thought. Her father, a truck driver currently between runs, sat and watched the morning news. Her mother, Kathy, was frying eggs for them before they went to work. Kathy worked in her grandfather's service station. That was

how her parents had met in fact. Lester's service station was on his usual route.

"Morning, Vinnie," her mother greeted. No one ever called her Lavinia; the name sounded too antiquated, despite being a family name.

"Hi mom," Vinnie answered, sitting next to her father. "I only want one egg, please."

"You need to eat more than that," her father chastised, still looking at the news. "Or you'll never put on any weight."

"Yes father," Vinnie replied, trying hard not to roll her eyes. His criticism was starting early today.

Kevin Matheson frowned and glanced sideways at her. "Don't be rude, Vinnie. You need to be healthy for the fall semester." He shook his head. "Of course, I still don't know how we're to pay for it."

"Now Kevin, we've been over this," Kathy spoke up, bringing their eggs to them. Vinnie looked at her mother. Kathy looked like an older, slightly more attractive version of her daughter, in contrast to Kevin's more chiseled features.

"Your brothers we sent away to college," her father continued. Vinnie tried to eat her breakfast in peace, but he would have none of that. "But we're going to have to send you locally, to the Oakwood University. Even then, you'll be lucky not to go in debt."

"I'm working, dad," she reminded him. "That should help somewhat."

"Yeah, as a secretary in an office building," Kevin grunted. "You'd make better money in tips if you were a waitress."

"In other news, local businessman William Zabel has made a purchase that has the art world buzzing," the

television continued. All three of them looked up; Zabel was none other than Vinnie's boss.

"Speak of the devil," Kevin muttered as the scene cut to a reporter standing outside of the boxlike building of Zabel Security Systems. About a decade ago, the company had moved to the outskirts of the county from the east coast. They made, distributed and installed surveillance cameras for other businesses. Kevin disliked them because they used their own drivers instead of his company, and because their traffic had congested the area of Lester's considerably.

Mr. Zabel was smiling for the camera now, and pointing to a medallion that seemed at odds with his dapper but nondescript suit. It was a large opal, roughly shaped and carved to look like a crescent moon. A ring of gold surrounded and supported the opal, and the whole piece hung from a gold chain.

"This artifact, valued at several million, was purchased from an overseas museum that recently went out of business," the reporter told the audience. He turned to Mr. Zabel. "Sir, what prompted this unusual transaction?"

"It is my intention to give this piece, called the Eye of Sin, to the Gallery of Oakwood University," Zabel replied. He was a broad shouldered, powerfully built man with dark eyes and hair. "I hope that it will increase interest and funding for the university, and benefit the community."

The reporter chuckled. "Did you just call that..."

"The Eye of Sin," Zabel confirmed. "Not 'sin' in the sense of displeasing God. Sin was also the name of ancient Mesopotamia's moon god."

More questions and answers followed, but Vinnie stood up, having finished her egg. "I'm going to have to

go," she told her parents. "I'm due there in about half an hour."

"Take the Oldsmobile, will you honey?" Kathy asked. "The other car I need to take in for an oil change before I go to work this afternoon."

"Okay mom," Vinnie said, hugging her mother. She slowly turned and put an arm around her father, who merely grunted. They had never really had much in common; Vinnie sometimes wondered how he had ever married. He seemed to neither understand nor like most women. Vinnie had tried to please him, but deep down, she suspected that he had wanted a third boy.

Leaving her home through the front door, Vinnie stepped out into the hot August morning. She looked up and down the street, and saw her neighbors going about their business. Some worked in their yards, and others were preparing for work themselves.

She looked at a house several doors down where Mike lived. He was off at school by now, and Vinnie thought she might pay him a visit after work. After breakfast with her dad, she could use some more enjoyable company.

II

The drive out to work took her outside town, in the opposite direction of Lester's. Zabel Security Systems loomed up, tall and foreboding against a landscape that had once held only cornfields. Had she turned and gone the other way on the state highway, she would have encountered a small wooded area, her grandfather's station, and an intersection that her mother always tried to avoid, because she had discovered an accident years ago. In fact, it was the very place where Mike's father had died.

There was a story to that, one that the town didn't like to discuss. Mike Sr. had been killed by a new neighbor's dogs, and his brother-in-law, Nathan Paxton, had gone after her with the help of the town minister. No one was sure what had happened after that, but the minister had died, the neighbor disappeared, and Mr. Paxton had been put on probation by the police. Mr. Paxton's moving company had almost gone under, but had survived, mostly due to the fact that people felt sorry for Paxton's sister, Helen, and her son, Mike Jr. Nathan Paxton himself, however, had been shunned and lived as a semi-retired hermit.

Vinnie parked her car in the company's spacious parking lot, and made her way to the glass doors in front. At the rear of the building, she saw two semis at the landing dock; a shipment was beginning to go out. A fairly large one too, from the look of it.

She entered the building, and saw Ellis Harlan standing by the front desk where she worked. Ellis and his mother, Blythe, were renowned electrical engineers who were consulting with Zabel on their newest equipment. While Ellis was friendly, his mother was not.

"Good morning, Dr. Harlan," Vinnie greeted as she walked up. Behind her desk was the logo for Zabel, a red circle with eight bars arranged four on each side. The shape resembled that of a spider. Beyond, the elevator leading to Mr. Zabel's office was on the right. He should have finished his interview by now, Vinnie thought.

Dr. Harlan's ageing, careworn features lit up and he smiled. "Good morning," he answered. They had become friends, bonding on their mutual problems. Both had parents who were impossible to please. He had followed in his mother's footsteps, but had confided in

Vinnie that nothing was ever good enough for her. Vinnie could relate all too well.

"Mr. Zabel is expecting you," he continued, heading for the elevator. She followed, and they went up to the hallway on the top floor. Walking down to it, Harlan pushed open the doors that led into Mr. Zabel's office, and held it open for her. Walking in, they saw Mr. Zabel was seated at his desk, perusing the contents of a manila folder. Behind him, there was a window to let the sun in, but he kept it shut most of the time. Off to the right, another door led to the board room, but Vinnie had never been in there, even on official business.

Dr. Blythe Harlan, Ellis' mother, was also there, giving a verbal report on their latest schematics and telling him that everything was on schedule. The elder Harlan was tall, angular, blond, and attractive in a model or cheerleader kind of way. But she had none of her

son's warmth, never smiled or laughed, and only spoke when addressed formally.

She looked up at them, blue eyes behind thick glasses, hair pulled back into a tight bun. Everything about her suggested a critical professor who never gave A’s. Vinnie felt sorry for Ellis having to grow up with such a mother.

"Ellis, come with me to the lab," Blythe ordered. "We have more work to do."

She looked at Mr. Zabel, nodded once, and led Ellis out of the office. She didn't even bother acknowledging Vinnie. Mr. Zabel looked up, saw her, and beckoned her with a wave of his hand. Vinnie walked around his desk, glancing at the clock. She was right on time, so she supposed that whatever he wanted had nothing to do with her personally.

"Ah, Ms. Matheson. Good morning," Mr. Zabel greeted as she entered. Vinnie noted that he was still wearing the Eye of Sin medallion that he had worn during the interview.

He saw her eyes go to it and smiled. "I couldn't bear to part with it just yet," he explained. "It's a marvelous piece, isn't it? Unique as far as anyone knows. It was only a stroke of incredible luck that enabled me to get it."

"Yes, sir. Did you need me for anything?" Vinnie asked.

Zabel nodded, folded up the manila envelope, and handed it to her. She took it as he stood and opened his window blinds.

"I want you to set up a meeting with the town board for me," he told her. "You see, our orders have been

steadily growing, and I want to help fund a widening of the highway that runs north."

He paused and looked out the window. His office faced the rear of the building, so they could see men loading boxes into the semis. Vinnie only knew one of two of them; while Zabel had brought revenue into the community, he had created comparatively few jobs. Most of the people who worked for the company came from the east where it was originally located.

"Your family's business is out there, isn't it?" he asked.

"That's right," she confirmed.

"Well, don't worry. My plans won't affect it in any way. The best place for road expansion will be in the woods, I think. That will be all for now. Thank you."

"I'll make the call and keep the file nearby, Mr. Zabel," Vinnie said, leaving the room.

She went back to her desk, dialed the town hall, and made the necessary arrangements. Then, she opened the file to leaf through it. It contained several pages of notes, as well as photographs of the area.

The latter made Vinnie pause. One of the photos had a pathway flanked by a forest on either side. A metal gate had been put over the road by the town, and padlocked. It wouldn't keep hikers out, but would prevent cars from turning off the main road.

Except for the gate, the path looked exactly like the path in her dreams.

The rest of Vinnie's day passed in a blur, for she found herself unable to stop thinking about the mysterious pathway that had appeared both in the photos and in her dreams. What could it mean? What lay beyond the path hidden from all eyes in the woods?

After her shift had ended, she quickly went out to her car, wanting to see the pathway for herself. The drive out to the wooded area nearly took her to her grandfather's station. In all likelihood, she had gone by it before, and never paid it any mind. It was funny how places and things could exist under one's very nose.

The gravel road began off the right of the state highway. Vinnie pulled her car over, got out, and walked over to the gate barring the path. She went to it, and stopped right where she could have walked around and started down the road.

But she didn't. Now that she was here, the urgency of seeing the road slowly ebbed away. She now felt a little foolish, rushing here as though it were a matter of life or death. What could have possibly enticed her to come?

She looked down the gravel road. Trees grew on either side, but she could see no animals. Usually, she could spot a deer or two, but not here. Furthermore, the path's end couldn't be seen as it turned off in a left direction. The path darkened somewhat, as if the sunlight found it harder to penetrate the forest canopy the further back it went.

Vinnie hesitantly began to walk around the gate. Although she still felt foolish, she decided that she might as well see what was here. After all, she had gone out of her way.

She had just rounded the gate when suddenly, the wind picked up. It had been a relatively still day, but without warning, the trees rustled and Vinnie hugged herself to offset a sudden chill. Something else also coursed through her, a certain feeling of dread or foreboding. She couldn’t see or hear anything unusual,

but she suddenly felt a strong compulsion to go back to her car. She didn’t belong here; she wasn’t welcome.

Almost entranced, Vinnie turned around and went back to her car. Looking in her rearview mirror, she watched as the path diminished in view. With a sigh, she started for home. She would explain her lateness as overtime to her parents. However, she was at a loss to explain it to herself.

III

The next morning was Saturday, so Vinnie didn't have to work. She was walking to Mike's house instead, as she hadn't had the opportunity to visit him last night. She figured he would be doing yard work as that was his usual summer activity. He wouldn't be sixteen for a few more months, so driving and working hadn't crept up and taken over his life just yet.

Sure enough, Mike was running his lawn mower over his front yard. Smiling to himself, Vinnie could see that he was in his usual good mood. She felt glad; she needed someone to talk to. Ellis Harlan was decent, but was much older and too busy.

She waved when she got closer, and Mike shut off his mower to greet her.

"Hi, Vinnie," he said with a grin, reaching out to squeeze her arm. "Are you off today?"

She smiled back, and gently dislodged his arm. She once again had the feeling that Mike was developing feelings beyond friendship, but didn't really know how to handle that. No one else had ever paid her that kind of attention, either wanted or unwanted, and she only wanted to remain friends with him.

“Hi Mike. No, I almost never work on Saturday," she told him.

"Well, I'm almost finished here anyway," he replied, pushing the mower off into his side yard. "What's going on? How are your parents?"

"About the same," Vinnie said. "They bicker more and more." She looked at him. "Do you ever fight with your mom?"

"Sometimes. Not often." He walked over to his front door. "Do you want to come in? Mom is taking care of some paperwork at her office."

"All right."

They walked into the kitchen, where Mike gave her a glass of soda. Then he poured one for himself before sitting down at the table. Vinnie had to give Ms. Ferris credit for teaching her son courtesy.

"Well, work has been very busy lately," she began. "Enjoy the rest of your childhood while you can."

"Busy with what?" Mike asked, sipping his drink.

"My boss, Mr. Zabel, is pushing for a widening of the state highway. There is this path near it that I think he wants cleared or something."

Vinnie frowned, and held up her glass, examining the ice cubes thoughtfully. An idea had come into her mind. "Mike...do you ever have dreams that seem almost real?"

"What brought that up?" he asked, frowning.

"Do you?"

Mike thought for a moment, clearly taken off guard. But Vinnie didn't know how else to tell him what was bothering her.

"Not really, no." He smiled sheepishly. "I guess I don't have a lot of imagination."

"Maybe I have too much," Vinnie answered. "I've been having the same dream for a few nights now. I'm

not in it, but I'm watching these three guys walking down a road. One of them's a policeman."

"Why would you dream something like that?" Mike asked.

She took a drink of her own soda before continuing. "I don't know, but here's the weird thing. The path is real. It's the same one that's near the would-be construction."

"Wow." Mike seemed to think about it for a moment. His brow furrowed in concentration, as he tried to come up with a possible explanation. "But you could be just remembering it from going by it."

"I thought about that. But I haven't gone to my grandfather's that often since I started working. Besides, what about the men?"

Mike shrugged. "What about them?"

Vinnie and Mike sat in silence for a moment, finishing their drinks. She looked at her friend while Mike sat quietly, staring into space. Vinnie remembered that Mike's stare had an echo of the blue-eyed man in her dreams. The sadness wasn't there, yet...

"One of the men looked a little like you," Vinnie told him. "Especially when you have that faraway look."

"Oh, sorry." Mike turned back to her. "Mom says I look like my Uncle Nathan when I do that. I think I look more like my dad, though."

"Your Uncle Nathan," Vinnie echoed. "Have I ever met him?"

"I doubt it. He doesn't go out much unless he's working. My uncle's a great guy, but a little strange. He's always reading old books and making trips to historical sites. He acts like he's trying to learn something, but I don't know what."

Mike shook his head. "He's in his own little world sometimes. I guess that's why neighbors think he's creepy."

"Wasn't he involved with something that happened near the path?" Vinnie asked, trying to remember the rumors about Nathan Paxton.

People speculated all kinds of things, but the mover never tried to defend himself. Indeed, he seemed to prefer to leave the truth obscured.

"Don't you start," Mike warned. "I got enough of that in grade school."

"Do you see him a lot?" Vinnie persisted. "Could you ask if he would talk to me?"

"No way. Uncle Nathan never talks about the time when dad died and he went off to find out why."

Mike was beginning to get defensive, and Vinnie hoped she hadn't angered him. No doubt, he and his

mother had been bothered by their neighbors for gossip about Paxton. No doubt they had long tired of it.

Still, the dreams had persistently bothered her, and she wanted to know why. True, it was only an impulse that had made her think to ask, but it was all she could think of.

"Please Mike?" Vinnie put her hand on his, and while he flinched, he didn't seem to mind. Vinnie felt a flash of self-reproach for it; it seemed too manipulative. But it was too late to undo the act, so she followed it through."

"If you tell me where he lives, I'll drive us out there. The dreams have been driving me crazy."

"Well…" Mike hesitated.

"If he doesn't want to talk to me, I'll leave. Unless you have something else this afternoon, couldn't we try?"

Mike finally nodded. After all, it would give him the excuse of spending more time with her. "All right," he said. "But don't expect much."

They drove to the other side of town, opposite that of the state highway, but south of the Zabel building. The houses here were larger, and more spread out; in the past, they might have belonged to wealthier residents, but no one in Oakwood was particularly wealthy now, except for Mr. Zabel. Pulling up a driveway, Vinnie found herself gazing at an old colonial style house with a decent sized yard. A truck from Paxton's company was parked in front of them. Nathan Paxton worked somewhat irregular hours, and had no jobs at the moment.

They got out of their car and knocked on the front door. Vinnie looked for a doorbell, and was mildly

surprised not to find one. Mike knocked once more, shrugged, and tried the handle. The door opened, and Mike glanced over his shoulder at her. "It's Uncle Nathan."

Vinnie supposed that Mike's uncle had reached a point where he no longer cared what people thought or whether they came. They stepped through into a living room containing a couch and two smaller chairs. Opposite them was a television that seemed to get little use and a CD player piled with albums from assorted seventies and eighties rock groups.

Next to one of the chairs was a small table that had various books and papers. On top was an apparently very old, leather-bound book opened to a passage. Vinnie glanced at it, and saw that it was handwritten in what looked like Latin, but that translations appeared in the margins written by another hand.

She didn't have time, however, to read, for they heard soft footsteps descending a staircase. Looking up, Vinnie and Mike saw a long haired, grizzled looking man approaching.

"Who is it?" he asked in an apprehensive, though not totally unfriendly tone.

"Hi Uncle Nathan," Mike answered. "I stopped by to introduce you to a friend. You forgot to lock your door again."

Nathan Paxton smiled and stepped forward to slap his nephew's back. "I was reading last night," he offered. "Sometimes I get too absorbed in my studies. Fortunately, I don't have much worth stealing."

Mike pointed to Vinnie. "Uncle Nathan, this is Vinnie Matheson. She wanted to meet you."

Nathan looked at her. "Kathy's daughter?"

"Yeah."

As he gazed at her, Vinnie in turn got a better look at him. He was probably around fifty, but looked older owing to the long graying hair and grey beard. He was tall, slender, and walked with a slight limp. His intelligent blue eyes matched Mike's, only they didn't have the naive innocent sparkle of his nephew's. Instead, there was a focus there, a determination mixed with the memory of things past. The overall effect made Vinnie think of either a madman or a prophet.

But that wasn't what caused Vinnie to raise her eyebrows when she saw him. For she felt an instant flash of recognition. If Nathan had shaved and cut his hair, he would look like an older version of the sad man in her vision.

"I've seen you before," Vinnie told him, marveling. "You've been in my dreams."

Nathan did listen to her. As she and Mike took a seat on the couch, Nathan settled into the chair next to the books and listened. As Vinnie related the dream, recognition crossed his features. Concern flashed through his eyes, and he grew noticeably more uncomfortable, but remained silent until the end of her recollections.

"That's why I wanted to come to you," Vinnie concluded. "To ask you about them." She paused. "Mr. Paxton, they really happened once, didn't they?"

Nathan pressed his lips together nervously, but looked up at her and nodded. "Yes."

Vinnie sighed grimly, as one does when the worst is confirmed. "I suspected that. They were too vivid, too complete, to be imagination. But I still don't know why I'm having them."

"Neither do I," Nathan admitted.

"But what did you face?" Vinnie asked. "You still haven't told me."

"Since you know part of it already, I'll tell you. Over fifteen years ago, Mike's father and I moved a new neighbor into a custom made house. This person was into the occult and killed Mike. I went with two friends to stop her before she could kill anyone else. Because she would have, believe me."

"What happened to her?" Vinnie asked.

"We stopped her," Nathan confirmed, but from his expression, Vinnie doubted she could coax any further details out of him. That single mindedness was creeping back into his eyes. Yet everything he had told her, he had said calmly, and lucidly, so she knew he wasn't mad.

Nathan nodded, remembering that night. "I had other help, too. One was Christ himself. As to the other..." He broke off, and pointed to a table next to

Vinnie's armrest, one she hadn't noticed when she came in.

"Do you see that?"

She turned and saw that a framed picture occupied the table. It showed Nathan, younger and unburdened, with his arm around a lovely young woman with black hair and deep brown eyes.

"That was my wife, Elaine," Nathan said.

"She's beautiful."

"Yes, she was. This part you might not believe, but I've seen her since she died. The last time was during the period of the visions you're having. Though I don't recommend trying to contact the dead yourself. Believe me; you're better off praying about it. Give it to God."

"Mr. Paxton, is the house where all this happened still there?" she asked. "Is it...haunted?"

Nathan frowned, and a slight edge came into his voice. "No," he said. "There's nothing there anymore, for you or anyone else. But you need to stay away just the same. Do you understand? Don't go near that place."

Later that afternoon, Vinnie returned home, after dropping Mike off. They had only spoken with Mr. Paxton a few more minutes after that. She had been afraid that she had angered the strange man, but when she left, he invited her to come back any time she wanted to talk.

She parked her car and sat for a moment in the driveway. While she had been given a piece of the puzzle, she still had so many questions. Why was she seeing the past experiences of others? What could it possibly have to do with her?

Her front door opened, and her mother stepped out. With a concerned look on her face, she walked over, so

Vinnie cut off her musings to step out. It was beginning to get dark anyway.

"Are you okay, honey? Kathy asked her daughter. "I thought you were only going to visit Mike."

Her father peered out the open front door, disapproval already registering on his dour face. Vinnie could never please him, even when she tried, so she figured she might as well be truthful with them.

"I did, mom," she said. "Mike and I started talking about my nightmares, and we lost track of the time. I'm sorry."

Kevin Matheson shook his head. "You missed supper, so if you're hungry, you'll have to warm it up in the microwave. You should have called if you were going to hang out all day."

"Mike took me to meet his Uncle Nathan..." she began to explain. But that only seemed to put her father in a surlier mood.

"What? Why would you possibly go around him?" he demanded.

Vinnie's mouth opened and shut as she found herself stammering for an answer. She hadn't expected anger.

"I... I thought...I heard that he knew about things like that..."

"You stay away from Nathan Paxton," Kevin interrupted. "He's crazy. Not to mention dangerous."

"Kevin," her mother began.

"He ought to be in jail; he's almost definitely a murderer," her father continued. "At the very least, he took the law into his own hands."

"You don't know that," Kathy argued. "It's only an old rumor."

Kevin stood aside and beckoned them in. "I don't want to fight in front of the whole neighborhood. Come on in."

Vinnie walked past her father to the kitchen, but he called after her.

"You heard what I said about Paxton. Now get something to eat and go to bed."

Kathy remained in the living room with her husband. As Vinnie stuck her head in the fridge, her parents resumed their argument.

"You don't have to treat her like she's still a child," Kathy chided. She felt protective of her only girl, as Kevin only seemed to know how to be harsh. Even with Vinnie's brothers, he had behaved that way, although to a much lesser degree.

"Come on Kathy," he retorted. "The only reason he got off with just probation is because he somehow had a

friend on the police force. Anyone else would be in prison or the psych ward at Whately."

"I'm not just talking about that," she said. Vinnie continued to listen as she got out a leftover plate of steak and potatoes. She walked to the microwave, heated her food, and began to eat without sitting down.

"Sometimes, you act like you don't even love her," Kathy said from the living room.

"Don't love her?" Kevin protested. "If I didn't care, I wouldn't try to warn her away from maniacs. Of course, I don't know if she'll listen. She's always staring off into space when I'm around."

"Nathan's not a bad man," Kathy insisted. "No matter what he did, and we don't know what happened. Can't you trust your daughter and give Nathan the benefit of the doubt? For Mike and Helen's sake?"

More arguing ensued, but Vinnie no longer wanted to listen. She put her plate down on the counter, shut her eyes, and put her hands over her ears. She had listened her whole life to chiding and arguing. She was tired of listening.

IV

It was a warm Monday morning; the sun was out, and not a cloud could be seen. But police detective Edward Thomas had to spend it at his desk, filling out paperwork. He rubbed his eyes and looked in the small mirror sitting on his desk. He had changed little since taking this job. He was a tall, fairly muscular, black man with a shaved head and mustache that was only now getting a few gray hairs. Considering all he'd seen, even in a small town, he felt gratitude that he hadn't aged more than he did.

The phone rang, and the detective picked it up. "Thomas. Oakwood Police Department."

"Ed, it's Nathan Paxton."

Paxton always stirred mixed feelings for Thomas. On one hand, he liked the mover as a person, and even visited him on rare occasions after his probation had ended. On the other hand, he was also connected with a series of events that Thomas had no desire to recall.

Even after several years and other memories fading, that incident remained fresh in his mind. No matter what happened, there was always some small, nagging doubt in his mind that it hadn't quite ended that night. Reminders found their way into his routine; even the normal patrol routes would take the policeman close to that abandoned road from time to time.

"Nathan, good morning. What can I do for you?" the detective asked.

"Could you come over this afternoon after work?" Nathan asked. "I have a small moving job this morning, but need to talk to you."

"Is something wrong?"

"Might be. I'm not sure," he said. "But before you come, could you do a check on Zabel Security Systems?" "What for?" Thomas asked, frowning. Nathan didn't usually call to make strange requests like that.

"I suspect Mr. Zabel of possibly having a connection to...that night."

Thomas held the receiver tighter, and felt an involuntary shudder up his spine. He didn't have to ask Paxton to explain further.

"I'll see you around five" he said. "Good bye, Nathan."

Several hours later, Edward Thomas sat on Nathan's couch while the mover looked through the old leather bound book that had been out when Vinnie and Mike were there. Known as the Cult of the Inverted Kingdom, it told the history of Nergal, a demon once worshipped as a god in ancient Mesopotamia. His cult, led by a necromancer, had fought for centuries with the family of Nathan's beloved wife. It was that very necromancer, Inana, whom they had defeated years ago.

"I did what you asked," the detective told Nathan when the mover seemed to find the passage he was looking for. "Zabel used to have a second company, a contracting firm that's since gone out of business. Shortly before that, he moved his remaining interests here from New York."

Nathan looked up and nodded grimly. "I was afraid you would say that, but not surprised. Do you remember

how you could find no trace of the construction records for Inana's house?"

"You think it was Zabel who built it?" Thomas asked. "Why jump to that conclusion?"

Nathan pointed to the book on his lap. "I have read this cover to cover half a dozen times. I even learned Latin so I wouldn't have to rely on the other translation. This passage tells how Inana at one point in time had an assistant named Amnon. He was her greatest assassin, so she gave him a special gift for hunting down their enemies. Although she couldn't create other Me' tablets to connect the Inverted Kingdom to Earth, she did create a medallion that enabled the wearer to contact Nergal, with the proper incantations. It was called the Eye of Sin."

Thomas' head snapped up, and he felt himself tensing again. "That was the artifact Mr. Zabel

purchased recently," Thomas confirmed. "The one discovered in the Middle East a few years ago."

"Right," Nathan nodded. "According to the account here, Nergal's foes, my wife's ancestors, fought Amnon and trapped him in a cave where he couldn't escape and where Inana couldn't find him. The Eye was lost until now, when someone who at least was close to Inana's whereabouts paid a lot of money for it."

Thomas thought for a minute. "I don't know. So far, I only have speculation. I can't arrest anyone or investigate any property without solid evidence to get a warrant."

"No, I realize that," Nathan said. "But I wanted you to know. You can be ready when or even if Zabel tries something." He sighed. "It's unlikely to just be a coincidence, but still possible. I don't know, maybe I am

wrong, and he really is only a collector. Maybe I've thought about it too much for too long."

"I know you have been watching for the cult's possible return," Thomas said.

"My sister thinks I've become obsessed," Nathan told him. "But I have to be ready if I'm right. I have to."

They sat in silence for a few more minutes. Each man searched his own thoughts, though neither liked what they found there. Finally, Thomas stood to leave.

"I'll stay in touch," he said, heading for the door. "Goodbye, Nathan."

Nathan didn't answer, but just remained sitting, his hands folded over the book in thought.

As Thomas opened the door, he turned back before leaving. "One thing, Nathan," he said. "Even if Mr. Zabel is going to try and contact Nergal, how could he open

the door? The tablets were destroyed, and the spell that created them was a onetime spell, according to you."

"I don't know. I wish I did."

The three men dropped to their knees, coughing. The goats surrounded them on all sides, their eerie calls piercing the night. As one, they slowly approached the men, closing the circle more and more.

"Doctor," the young man, Nathan rasped, his throat raw with sickness.

The old man fumbled in his coat for something. Shortly, he produced a simple wooden cross from his pocket. The symbol caused the goats to pause, and cease their calling. Their shapes wavered and blurred into roughly humanoid shapes, before vanishing into the night air.

The men's sickness seemed to vanish with them. Warily, they stood, looked at each other, and slowly continued their way down the path. The pale moonlight cast strange shadows on the road, but for the moment, nothing else challenged them.

They rounded the bend, and found themselves approaching a strange stone house. A large porch framed heavy wooden front doors. The main body of the house was in a roughly shotgun style, with narrow windows set in sills devoid of shutters or any other decoration. The rear was composed entirely of a windowless stone tower that stood over twice as tall as the main body of the house. No windows or openings could be seen from this angle.

Growls pierced the silence, growls of creatures that could neither be seen, nor that sounded like any earthly animal. Rather, there was something in the calls,

something unnatural, and unholy that caused the men's hair to stand on end and their hands to grip their weapons tighter.

The policeman ran in the direction of the beast's calls, shouting over his shoulder as he went...

"Vinnie," a voice called, stirring Vinnie out of her dream. Once again, she had seen Nathan Paxton and company walking down the path that fateful night. She sat up, and looked over at her doorway.

But the door was closed, and she was alone in the room, with the lights off. She shrugged, figuring that she had only been hearing things, and tried to lie back down to go to sleep. She was too tired now to even wonder why the recurring dream was moving forward. She had just about fallen back asleep, when the voice called out again.

"Vinnie, come here. Vinnie, come to us."

It didn't sound like either of her parents. For that matter, she couldn't even identify the voice as male or female. She slowly got out of bed, and flipped on her light. She saw no one, and wondered where the voice had come from. It didn't echo or have any unusual inflections, despite the ambiguity.

She opened her door a crack, and looked out into the hall. Her parents' door was shut, as was the bathroom. The stairway contained nothing.

Vinnie hesitantly took a step out of her room. She breathed heavily, and looked from side to side. While she realized that leaving her room wouldn't be prudent if there was a burglar, she also felt that she couldn't sit and do nothing.

Her brow furrowed as a thought slowly made its way past the fear in her mind. The voice had called her by

name; a burglar would hardly do that. So, what was going on? Very slowly, she took another step down the hall.

Suddenly, her parents' door opened, and a figure lumbered out. Vinnie jumped, held her arms out, and cried out with mingled fear and surprise.

"Vinnie! You scared me to death," her father gasped, clutching her chest. "What are you doing?"

"I'm sorry," Vinnie said. "I thought someone called my name."

"I heard you moving around," Kevin grumbled. "Go to bed. Some of us have to get up tomorrow."

"I'm sorry," Vinnie repeated, looking down the stairwell. Sure enough, the door was still locked.

V

Vinnie stepped out of the elevator to the hall opening to her boss' office. As she walked forward, her

thoughts were cluttered with a mixture of the strange and the mundane. The dreams continued and were moving to…what? She still didn't see any more of the house, despite having the second dream for three days in a row now. Would she ever see the end of it? Would it end in the conflict that Nathan Paxton to this day refused to talk about?

"Coming through," two workers called, walking past her and making her lean against the wall to let them carry a large computer monitor into Zabel's office. The busy office had the normality, or as close to it as her life had these days. Six of these new security computer terminals had already been installed at facilities in Oakwood and surrounding towns. She had been busy telephoning their clients and telling them of a further upgrade that was supposed to be uploaded via internet in a few days following installation.

She walked into the office, where Ellis was attaching the monitor to a large motherboard. Blythe sat in a chair, and punched in commands with the keyboard. When the monitor was attached, the screen showed an image of a red circle with eight rectangles, the abstract spider logo for the company.

"Zabel Security Systems," a computer voice called from the device. "Let our web protect you."

Behind the computer and chair, against the wall beside the door to the office, a metal panel, nearly as tall as the door, had been erected. Cables taped to the floor connected the base of the panel to the computer. Vinnie had been told that the whole assembly had been made to enable more memory capacity for the computer.

But while Vinnie was no computer expert, somehow that explanation rang false to her. For one thing, she had never seen anything quite like this panel. For another, a

design had been worked into it. A tablet like shape, something resembling Moses being given the Ten Commandments, was etched into the panel. But instead of moral laws from God, this 'tablet' contained multiple lines of wedge shaped markings. Somehow, they looked like writing, but to Vinnie, Greek would have looked more familiar. She suspected the entire apparatus was some type of trade secret.

Mr. Zabel was standing in front of his desk, directing two more technicians to put a video camera, also connected to the computer, into the board room. He looked up at Vinnie, smiled and waved. Vinnie nodded back respectfully. She found herself realizing, for the first time, that he didn't look too unlike Mr. Paxton. Both had long hair and full beards. Both had intelligent, penetrating eyes. Both seemed to know things that they wouldn't tell.

Though differences did exist; Mr. Zabel was stronger and not nearly as grey, despite looking roughly the same age. Furthermore, today there was something in those eyes that made Vinnie uncomfortable. Not a flirtatious look, but one that still assessed her.

"How are you feeling today, Ms. Matheson?" he asked in a pleasant tone.

Vinnie shrugged. "I am all right, sir," she told him. "Just a little tired. I haven't slept well lately."

"I know." When she looked up at him questioningly, he shrugged. "It has seemed rather obvious. You'll forgive me, but you haven't looked well lately."

"I will be okay, Mr. Zabel," Vinnie answered him.

Zabel stroked his beard for a moment. Then his hands brushed against the Eye of Sin before returning to his side. "Why don't you go home today after lunch?"

Vinnie raised her eyebrows in mild surprise but he waved his hand in a dismissive gesture. "You have done nothing wrong; have no fear of that. But, as I said, you look a little run down. Besides, the men here will be working for the rest of the day. They will need all the space they can get."

"Well, if you insist," Vinnie said hesitantly, still wondering if she had said or done something to displease him. Certainly, her father seemed perpetually disappointed or irritated with her.

He smiled. "Good. You can get some rest and be put to better work tomorrow."

Nathan heard someone knocking at his door, stirring him out of his nap. He had been dozing in his favorite chair after a particularly long day at work. He glanced at his watch, and noted with dismay that it was nearly

seven in the evening. He still hadn't started his dinner yet.

Well, he thought. *It will have to wait until I see to my unexpected company first.* He stood, stretched, and opened his front door.

It was his sister, Helen Ferris. Although a few years younger, her features mirrored his to the point that they could almost have been twins. She had a few wisps of gray in her medium brown hair, but it somehow gave her a mature, rather than haggard look. While never as beautiful as Elaine had been, she was a fairly typical Midwestern woman whose main source of attractiveness lay in her authenticity. There was nothing artificial or phony in her, neither in her look, nor in the smile she greeted her brother with.

"Oh, hi sis," Nathan said, giving her a hug. He noted the brown paper bag she was carrying. "What brings you here?"

"I brought you some dinner," she replied, coming in. The two walked into the kitchen where Nathan had his table also. He didn't have a dining room as such; he had very few visitors.

"Bless you," Nathan smiled, pulling out a chair for her. "I'm starving."

"I figured you would be, after our job today," she replied, sitting down and pulling out some homemade roast beef sandwiches. Nathan went over to his kitchen counter and turned on his coffee maker. It was later, but he liked to space his coffee throughout the day.

"Mike is at a movie with some friends of his, so I thought I'd catch up with you," Helen continued while

Nathan watched the coffee percolate. "I don't like being alone."

She looked at her brother as he sat down, bringing two cups of coffee with him. "Our family doesn't have many members," she said. "That's all the more reason we need to stay in each other's lives and not just at work."

They said a quick blessing and began to eat. Nathan found himself enjoying his sandwich, as he always did. His sister still knew how to take care of her loved ones.

"Is something on your mind, Helen?"

"Mike told me the other day that he and Vinnie Matheson, Kathy's daughter, came to see you," she told him. "He said you talked with her about that night."

Nathan swallowed his bite of food and nodded. "I don't know why, but she has been having dreams about it." He looked at Helen, and saw her eyes cloud over with

worry and dismay. "Inana may be gone, but I can't help but feel that there are others."

Helen shook her head. "I don't know what to say, Nathan. I don't know what to think. But I do know that I don't want those things to take over my life. They already took our pasts, our parents, and our spouses."

She shook her head but was getting visibly upset. "Mike was one of a kind. I know he's gone, but I want some future to look forward to. Some future where the past stays in the past."

"I wish that too," Nathan whispered. He looked into his cup of coffee. "I never asked for any of this. I wished things had been different."

Helen took a trembling drink of her own beverage. "Nathan," she began. Then she sighed and shook her head. "I can't fight whatever's happening. I know that. But what I don't know is what to do."

"Just be ready," Nathan said. "Keep your trust in God. I've done that and been learning all that I can. I've studied all the history and theology I could find, particularly what the Professor and Dr. Fowler left behind."

"I know. You changed after that night," Helen commented. "You lost the depression that had been plaguing you and instead got a type of...focus."

"As I said, I have to prepare." He stood and hugged her again. "I know you're afraid. But we will face whatever happens together."

He reached into his shirt and pulled out a cross that he had been wearing around his neck. "That belonged to Dr. Fowler," Helen said.

"I've worn it ever since," Nathan confessed. "Both it and the one it represents will be there in the times to come. Believe that."

VI

Vinnie walked alone in the still darkness. She stood before the strange house Nathan had been approaching, although she had no idea where he had gone. The hazy, almost floating feeling, confirmed that she was again dreaming, but the dream had changed yet again. While before, she had only been an invisible spectator, now she found herself actually participating in this nightmare born of the past.

What was she to do? Hesitantly, she began to walk off to the right side of the house. There was no reason for this, but she felt herself carried by forces she couldn't understand, or even fully perceive.

As she rounded the front of the house, she saw an old barn off in the distance. A pile of old wood was stacked beside it. She thought she saw the flicker of a

light in between the old wooden planks that made up the front, so she slowly made her way to it.

Reaching the barn, Vinnie placed her hand on the wood pile. The wood was old and crumbling, but dry, and she reflected that it would make a very good fire. She was about to move on, when a flicker of movement caught her eye.

A spider scurried from under the log she had been feeling, and looked at her with cold, black eyes. Its legs and body were covered with bristly hair and the spider's body was red. The length of its legs was roughly equal to her hand span.

Disgusted, she tried to draw her hand back, but the thing bolted forward and bit her with amazing speed. She screamed as her hand suddenly seemed to double in weight. Vinnie could feel a feverish warmth steadily

course through and up her arm. The spider ran back under the logs, and she couldn't say what became of it.

Clutching her arm, she backed away from the barn. All thoughts of trying to enter it now faded from her mind, and she only wanted to leave this horrible place. She turned, and wanted to run, but her entire body now felt warm and sluggish. As a result, she could only plod forward, as though entranced, except she could feel her own cold fear.

She heard the sounds of shouting and turned to the house. She noticed that the tower portion had a small crawl space she hadn't noticed before. Red lights streamed out of it, and despite the fear, Vinnie felt herself pulled to it. Something, or someone, wanted her to see whatever was there.

She knelt down, and peered inside. In the center of the otherwise unfurnished room, an altar blazed with

fire, and lights emitted from seven stone tablets placed on it. A hooded figure was standing there, shouting at Nathan, who had somehow gotten inside, and was running the perimeter of the tower. Vinnie saw no trace of the others.

Nathan pulled his bundle out of his coat, revealing it to be a stick of dynamite. Lighting it, he tossed it over his shoulder. The cloaked figure tried to grab it, but missed, and it hit the altar, detonating. Nathan continued to run and dove through the crawl space directly towards Vinnie…

Vinnie suddenly sat straight up in bed, her forehead bathed in sweat. She looked around her room, and listened, half expecting to hear a voice again. But only silence greeted her ears, and she felt her heartbeat slowly return to normal.

She got out of bed, and put on clothes that had been laid out for the next day. She was cold, and was trying to get warm again, but even the clothes weren't helping. Vinnie hugged herself, and thought about her latest dream.

What should I do? She wondered. Nathan Paxton had warned her away from the house in the woods but had also denied any haunting. She had seen the end result of his encounter, and thought that surely nothing was there now.

Still, she had a desire to end the dreams once and for all. She didn't understand them, and found herself wanting to purge them. Perhaps, just perhaps, she could find a clue to do so where it had happened.

Reaching for the door, Vinnie slowly opened it, making as little noise as possible. When she walked out and put her ear to her parents' door, she heard the

snoring of both Kathy and Kevin. Satisfied, she went to her room, pulled a flashlight out of her drawer, and went back out to the hall.

The night air was still warm with August heat, and she decided to walk to the house. The car might make noise. She wanted to keep it quiet.

The walk was both solitary and uneventful, and Vinnie presently arrived at the gate. Shining the flashlight, she saw the roadblock, but nothing beyond stirred in the woods. Looking at the gate, Vinnie wondered once more why she had come here. Did the reason behind her mysterious visions really lie here, waiting? Or was Mr. Paxton right in warning her away?

Gritting her teeth, Vinnie slowly walked around the gate. She had come, and while she was now afraid, alone in the dark, she decided to move on. Her skin chilled

when she walked around the barrier, and stood on the other side. But otherwise, she felt no differently, and began to walk the path.

She proceeded slowly, shining her light from side to side. The gravel crunched under her feet, and the shadows closed in around her. Presently, she came to the place where the goats had appeared years ago. She tensed; would something appear to her? But the only sound was the soft heavy sound of her breathing.

Then, a cry pierced the silence, and the tree at her left rustled.

She ducked and looked upward, just in time to see the shadow of a screech owl taking flight. Vinnie watched the owl for a moment, stood, and proceeded forward. No further noises reached her ears, nor did she see any trace of the unusual. She soon came upon the house, darkened and boarded up, but otherwise just as it

had been in her dreams. A broken down fence surrounded a yard overgrown with weeds.

She heard a faint roll of thunder in the distance, and silently cursed herself for not driving out here. Even if she had awakened her parents, at least she wouldn't be returning home tired and now probably wet. A slight wind picked up, confirming that there was a storm coming.

Vinnie shined her light at the house's front porch. She doubted whether that would give her a lot of protection. Walking slowly up the front steps, she hesitantly grabbed the doorknob. She jiggled the handle, but the doors had been locked. Another thunder clasp rolled through the sky overhead, and Vinnie tugged at the door. It wouldn't move.

With a small cry of dismay, she stepped down and began to walk along the perimeter of the house. She now

regretted her rash choice in coming here, but it was too late to turn back home now. She would have to find shelter until this unexpected rainstorm blew over.

The flashlight revealed several windows, all carefully boarded up. Whoever had sealed the house, whether the Oakwood Police or Mr. Paxton himself, had done a thorough job. Passing the body of the house, she reached the rear tower. After shining her light around, she noted that the crawl space was still there, but also boarded up. Vinnie crouched down, and tried to pull one of the boards loose, but they held firm. Even after all these years, the barrier proved impenetrable.

A few drops of rain began to fall as thunder rolled in louder, and more frequently. Vinnie stood and turned her flashlight in the direction of the old barn where she had been bitten in her dream. She saw that it had completely caved in, having been much older than the house itself.

As more rain fell, Vinnie turned to hurry back to the porch. Even that was better than nothing, she thought. But as she ran back around, she noticed something.

A window was now open to her.

She had heard nothing, but the board covering the side window nearest to the front door had fallen down. She wondered at first what had happened, but the rain picked up, so she ran towards it. The interior of the house was, of course, dark, but she jumped in anyway.

Outside the rain pelted the house, and Vinnie looked around the front room. Her light revealed the other side of the front doors, so she knew this had once been the parlor. No furniture remained, and a layer of dust covered the floor. Vinnie walked to the middle of the room, turned and shined her light down the hall.

At the end of the hall, a door barred the way to the tower. Rooms branched off on either side, and for some

reason, a large hole was in the floor about halfway between her and the tower. It evidently led to a pit of some kind.

Vinnie felt herself frozen in place. She could see her breath in here, despite the fact that she had avoided most of the rain. She walked forward, just wanting to get his whole ordeal over with. This was why she came; she might as well proceed.

She looked in the rooms, but they proved just as barren as the parlor. The pit was easily avoided by hopping over it. She was now at the tower door.

Unlike the front doors, this one yielded to her touch, and she gained access to the tower. Entering, she found herself in the very place where the necromancer had once lurked. To her surprise, a portion of the central altar remained; it was part of the floor, and couldn't be removed.

As she looked upon the altar, she felt a strange compulsion to reach out and touch it. All her fears and questions slowly ebbed away as she approached it. It was as though the object actively filled her thoughts, easing out everything else gently, but firmly. Part of her realized that she had been drawn here, despite her conflicting feelings. Behind her, the door silently shut, though she didn't notice. Vinnie put a hand on the altar.

And screamed.

VII

"Detective Thomas, Oakwood Police Department," the voice over the phone said.

Kathy held the phone to her ear nervously. She stood at her kitchen counter, while Kevin paced nervously around the room. They had awakened early that morning, only to discover that Vinnie was missing. Her car remained, but she had vanished.

At first, they had tried not to panic. They had instead listened to the soothing rain fall, and waited for her to call them. But she neither called nor returned, and Kathy feared that something terrible had happened.

"Yes, officer," she began. "My name is Kathy Matheson. I live at 6090 Kive Street. I'm calling to report a missing person. My daughter."

"How long missing?" the detective asked.

"At least six hours. Her car is still here."

"Have you tried to call her, ma'am?" the policeman asked.

"Her phone and keys are still in her room," Kathy told him, visibly trying to remain patient. "Her name is Lavinia. She's seventeen years old..."

Suddenly she heard the sound of a door opening. Vinnie had returned. Kevin ran into the living room and Kathy thought she would double over in relief.

"I'm sorry officer," she said, sheepish but too thankful to care. "She's just came back."

"All right. Good day, ma'am," Thomas said, though somewhat annoyed. He was really too busy for 'false alarms.'

Kathy ended the call, and joined her family in the living room.

"Vinnie, where have you been?" she called out as she stood by her husband. "I was so..."

She stopped when her daughter came in the front door. Vinnie was soaked; water dripped from her hair and clothes, and her skin looked cold and clammy. She seemed to have been walking for hours in the rain. Her eyes were bloodshot and drifted in and out of focus.

Kevin frowned and folded his arms. "All right," he said. "Let's hear some talk. Where have you been, and why?"

Vinnie looked at them, and seemed to be trying to concentrate. Some of the glaze left her eyes and she eyed them with an unreadable look. She didn't answer her father, and he began to get irritable.

"You heard me," he said more firmly. "What were you doing?"

She still didn't answer, but her lips curled into an unfamiliar sneer. With a glance of contempt, she moved past them to ascend the staircase. Now her father was really angry.

He grabbed her arm to stop her, but she turned to him. She had a look on her face of pure, cold hate. She snarled, and with surprising strength, grabbed him, and pushed him into a table that had a lamp perched on it. The impact doubled him over and broke the furniture. Kevin screamed and clutched his arm.

As the rain storm ended, Detective Thomas drove his police car down the road. He had been almost finished with his patrol, when a dispatcher had sent him to Kive Street to check a report of a domestic disturbance. The unsettling thing, however, was that it came from the Matheson home again.

Kathy Matheson had called the station back, and reported that her daughter was attacking her father. Screaming and throwing things, apparently in complete hysteria. The detective frowned as he turned down Kive Street. Why would anyone do such a thing? Was she a victim of abuse?

He pulled outside the Matheson's home, and saw a crowd of onlookers across the street. Helen Ferris and her son were among them. Stopping his car, he got out and walked towards the driveway. Sure enough, he did see something there.

It was a girl in her late teens, very pale and very thin in the doorway. She was swinging a broken chair inside, hitting a man whom he assumed was her father. Thomas had his gun out, and aimed at her. A policeman had to think and move fast.

"Police! Put your hands on your head!" he shouted.

She threw the chair at him, but aimed poorly, and the would-be projectile flew past his shoulder. The onlookers on the street began hollering and clamoring, but thankfully stayed far enough away to let Thomas handle it alone. Vinnie then ran down her sidewalk away from everyone. Thomas put the gun back in his holster and pursued. As he was larger and stronger, he soon overtook and tackled her a few yards away.

"You are under arrest," he barked, pinning her to the ground. He pulled her hands behind her back with one hand, while reaching for his handcuffs with the other.

Oddly, the girl didn't try to resist any further. Rather, she allowed herself to be cuffed and brought back to a standing position.

Thomas walked her back towards his squad car. The crowd was now buzzing with conversation and pointing, but he ignored them. The Matheson's door opened; Kevin staggered out. Thomas spoke into his radio for an ambulance.

"I'm sorry, Ms. Matheson," he said. "I'm going to have to take her to Whately for observation. I will send another detective to you; we'll have to ask you and your husband a few questions."

Kathy paused. "Officer," she said in a small voice. "She's a good girl."

"I'm sorry," he repeated. The ambulance sirens could be heard down the street. Kathy began to cry as it

pulled into the driveway and EMT's brought out a stretcher for Kevin.

VIII

At Whately Hospital, Kevin was taken to the emergency department. Detective Thomas and a couple of orderlies walked Vinnie up to the psychiatric ward. Once entering, he put her into a room.

"I'm going to contact a friend of mine," he told her. "He is a specialist; I think he can help."

She turned her gaze to Thomas, silently ordering him to be quiet, and daring him to keep talking. He didn't, and she growled low in her throat three times. The snarls didn't even sound like her anymore.

For some reason, Thomas felt afraid. A fear that he hadn't had since the incident with Nathan Paxton chilled his blood, and he turned to go. But as he left, he felt himself jolted, like an invisible arm had grabbed him.

In the doorway leading away from the room, he turned to look at Ms. Matheson again. She glowered at him, and her eyes didn't have a trace of madness. Instead, her look was one of pure evil. Then, the door slammed shut. It took Thomas a moment to realize that it had shut completely by itself.

"Keep an eye on her," Thomas told the nervous orderlies and floor nurses. He quickly hurried out. He needed help, and only knew one place to get it.

"And you would be willing to testify, for the record, that there is no history of abuse in your household?" the detective asked.

Kevin had his arm in a cast, and was resting in a hospital bed. He also had several cuts and bruises. Kathy, Helen and Mike had followed and were seated in the room next to him while a policeman sent by Thomas

made his report. Kathy had cried most of the time, while Helen had her arm around her, trying to comfort her. Kevin answered the questions grimly, yet honestly, and Mike just sat there, frowning at Vinnie's father.

Mike had never liked Kevin. The man was gruff, unfriendly, and had never treated Vinnie well. He had wanted a third son, never realizing the treasure he had in his daughter. Mike had always felt sorry for her, and sometimes just wanted to hold Vinnie and comfort her. He had always liked her, always been fascinated with her, and recently, had even felt a little protective of her.

He wondered at his own feelings. Was he falling for Vinnie after all? Should he tell her? Or was he too young for her to have any interest?

"I swear to you, officer. I've never hurt her," Kevin insisted, interrupting Mike's thoughts. The man was getting defensive, and for good reason. True, he had

never laid a hand on Vinnie, but sometimes he upset her so much, Mike wanted to tell the older man off. Of course, he never would; his mother and uncle had taught him otherwise. But he still thought about it.

Even Kathy looked pointedly at her husband. "I haven't," Kevin repeated, more forcefully this time. "I've always provided for her. I'm not a bad man."

The detective nodded once. "Very well. I have your statements, and Detective Thomas will be contacting you soon. Good day."

He nodded again, somewhat awkwardly, and left. Kathy sighed, and shook her head.

"Why?" she asked Helen. "Why is this happening?"

Helen wanted to say something, wanted to answer her that there was always hope, because God was always there, but the words stuck in her throat. Feelings of anguish, uncertainty, and even anger have to pass before

any counsel could be given. There was simply no way to rush that.

"We'll pray for you, Kathy," Helen finally said, having nothing else to say.

Kathy slowly nodded, and hugged her old friend. "We have to get our family back on track."

Kevin shook his head. "I'm not a bad man," he kept saying. But somehow, his voice had softened as his defenses faded. Mike looked up at him, and saw genuine regret in his face. He realized that he wouldn't need to argue with Kevin after all. For deep down, Kevin was finally admitting that he could have been a better, or at least kinder, father to Vinnie. That realization, and the guilt it brought, would be punishment enough.

IX

Nathan opened his door, to find Detective Thomas there. The policeman had been pounding on his door,

and had a frightened look on his face now. Nathan stepped aside to let him in, but Thomas shook his head.

"Nathan, I have some bad news," the detective told him. "Do you have Dr. Fowler's book and cross?"

"Of course, but why?" Nathan asked, confused.

"Can you use them?"

"Ed, what's going on?"

"I picked up a girl named Vinnie Matheson today," Thomas said as Nathan grabbed the Cult of the Inverted Kingdom from his living room. Together, they made for his car.

"I know her," Nathan said, as they buckled up. Thomas started to drive back into town. Overhead, the sun was setting. "She was having dreams about the night we fought Inana. She wanted to go to the house, but I told her not to."

"Nathan, she was attacking her family and vandalizing her home," Thomas told him. "It'll probably be on the late evening news tonight."

"Go on."

"When I took her to Whately, I felt an invisible hand grabbing me. Nathan, she's been possessed; somehow I know."

Nathan closed his eyes, and rubbed his forehead. "She did go there, didn't she?" he asked, though not specifically at Thomas. "I was afraid they were returning."

"Nathan, she needs help, and I don't know how," Thomas interrupted. "Can you do anything?"

"Perhaps," Nathan replied. "God willing." He pulled out the cross that Fowler had owned from around his neck.

"This is the cross of Roland de Beaumont. According to the book here, it was given to that member of my wife's family in a vision centuries ago. Said to come from heaven and supposedly carved from the Tree of Life, it is a weapon against evil.”

"How so?" Thomas asked, turning a corner.

"This cross can take a person's strength, so that it loses its ability to influence the living world. It is not annihilation, but the spirit can no longer do anything, for good or ill."

"Can you use it to save Vinnie Matheson?" Thomas asked.

"I'll try," Nathan answered. "Pray that I can."

Nathan and Thomas pulled up to the hospital, as evening fell. The streets were relatively quiet, so the drive had taken no time at all. Behind them, a van from

Vinnie's employer, Zabel, pulled in as well. They would recognize that red spider logo anywhere.

Two men got out and began unloading computer equipment. Two more men, technicians, came out of the van, and carried a large panel, about the size of a door, inside the main lobby.

Thomas and Nathan looked at each other. They had a bad feeling, on top of the bad feelings about Vinnie. The activity seemed normal, and yet, there was a wrongness that they couldn't quite put their fingers on.

But they had more urgent things to worry about. They entered the hospital, walked past the computer men and the main lobby, and took the elevator to the psychiatric ward.

The door to Vinnie's room was shut, so they opened it and went inside. It was dark, and Vinnie was sitting on the bed, seemingly calm now.

"Looking for something?" she asked them. Nathan noted that while the voice was Ms. Matheson's, the mouth wasn't quite in sync with the words. Indeed, it looked like an outside force was using her like a puppet. Or a mask.

"Who are you?" Nathan asked, feeling more courage than he felt, despite his faith. His mind was silently offering prayer for help. "Tell me your name."

The fury in her eyes grew stronger, though she didn't raise her 'voice.' "Do you know who I am, Nathan Paxton? You destroyed my sister."

Nathan drew in a deep breath. This was no ordinary spirit. It was the soul who had become bride to Nergal, according to the legends.

"Erishkigal," he said. "The queen of Nergal's underworld."

"Yes." She smiled tightly. "You defeated us once. In her hubris, Inana wanted to do everything herself. But our other servants remained."

"Mr. Zabel," Thomas said, remembering again that Zabel technicians were in the lobby.

"He brought us back, and gave us the opportunity to form our new kingdom. We lured this girl to my sister's house where I lay in wait for her. How I missed having flesh."

"I've heard enough," Nathan said, pulling out the book.

Erishkigal growled, and an invisible force set the book on fire. Nathan and Thomas cried out, and Nathan dropped the book as it burned. Then, the two men felt a pressure in their chests, as though a vice was being tightened around them. They sank to the floor, clutching

their hearts for fear that they would burst inside. Erishkigal smiled, using Vinnie's lips.

"We had to capture you as well," the spirit continued. "Now you are too late. Our servant has joined with Nergal, and our other souls will soon follow. Over time, we merged together. We are one. We will triumph."

Nathan felt his fingers brush against the cross as his heart strained against the pressure. He suddenly felt a renewed sense of strength, and knew his prayer had been answered. He tore open his coat and pulled the cross out. His fear subsided, replaced with a confidence not fully his own.

Slowly, he staggered to his feet. Erishkigal’s sneer turned to shock as her enemy fought against the attack. He held Roland de Beaumont's cross in front of the evil before him.

"Recognize this?" he asked.

He felt something try to pry it out of his hands, but Nathan held firm.

"In His name, come out of her," he said, stepping forward.

"No!"

"Release her! Now!"

Erishkigal growled at him, the sound too horrible to be identified as either animal or human. Something like black sludge issued from Vinnie's pores. It congealed into the dark, featureless silhouette of a woman. Behind it, Vinnie's body fell backward in slow motion, to finally collapse on the bed. The specter leaped at the advancing Nathan.

Nathan's hand came up then, and the spirit found the cross right in its midst. It looked down, saw the holy object, and issued a scream of terror, rage and despair. It lost its shape, and seemed to lose constancy. Finally, it

collapsed into a harmless fog that blew out in all directions, becoming thinner and thinner until it disappeared.

Thomas felt the pressure immediately vanish as well, and the policeman stood. The chill was also subsiding. Nathan stood in silence as the detective stood next to him. They watched Vinnie for a moment.

At first, she didn't move, but slowly, her eyelids fluttered open. With a moan, she tried to lift her head, but was still too groggy. Nathan and Thomas went to her, knelt down, and looked into her eyes. They had cleared, and were filled with mingled fear and confusion.

"Vinnie," Nathan said, gently putting his arm around her. He eased her into a sitting position.

"Mr. Paxton?" she asked, looking around the walls of the hospital room. "How did I..."

"You didn't," he told her grimly. "You were taken."

"Mr. Paxton…I didn't listen to you. I went to the house." She put her head in her hands. "I'm so sorry."

"It's all right," he told her. "They won't hurt you anymore. Do you see the importance now of giving yourself to Him?" He held up the cross.

She nodded slowly. "I do. I will."

Thomas looked at Nathan. "We need to get to Zabel. He must be the 'servant' she mentioned."

"You're right." He looked at Vinnie. "Stay here. It will be as safe as anywhere else."

She nodded once, and her eyes closed. Soon, she was snoring, exhausted. Thomas and Nathan left her, walked past the frightened hospital staff without bothering to explain, and went back down to the lobby.

The computer and panel were set up at the main desk. There was no one there at night, and the Zabel technicians were gone. Looking warily at each other,

they slowly moved outside. It was now dark, and the van was still in the parking lot.

Two men got out and began to approach menacingly. Thomas raised his gun, but the other two tackled them from behind. Then, they dragged Nathan and Thomas to the back of the van with hands over their mouths. They were shoved in and the doors were shut. Thomas pounded the walls of the van and shouted, but to no avail. Metal and glass separated them from the cab where the men piled in and proceeded to drive away.

Anger mingled with dismay and fear as they saw themselves being driven out to Zabel's main office just outside of town. There were only a few lights on and most of the trucks had gone. Nathan still didn't know exactly what was being planned, or what the computer equipment had to do with it.

X

The van pulled up in front of the main door, and the men got out. Seconds later, the back doors opened, and their only escape was flanked. They came for him, and Thomas shot one of them down before they rushed him and wrestled the gun away from him.

Step by step, they were dragged inside. The elevator doors off to the side opened, and Mr. Zabel himself stepped out. Instead of his usual suit, he wore a tunic with a cord for a belt. His hair and beard had been braided, giving him the appearance of a warrior from antiquity.

He looked at the two and smiled cordially. "Well now, let us see if we can clear this up, shall we?"

Nathan and Thomas glowered at Zabel but remained silent. The executive held the elevator doors open, and

they were shoved in. Nathan's thoughts raced through his head; they had taken Thomas' gun away, but not his cross. He had put it in his pocket after the exorcism and was pretty sure it hadn't fallen out when they were captured. However, he couldn't risk checking just yet.

"You took the bait, at the cost of Erishkigal," Zabel said, frowning. "I hate to lose her. She was with me for so long. Still..."

"What do you want?" Thomas demanded.

"You don't know much of the world's past, do you?" Zabel asked. "To you, it is little more than obscure events and strange names. You don't know of the ancient world, with its endless warfare and famine. Where people, including my ancestors, hunkered in their houses of brick and stone to escape the heat of the desert and the assault of enemies. Where the creator spirit, whom you call 'God,' offered salvation without strength. But we

found a spirit who did promise power to rule and to kill. Nergal."

The elevators opened to the top floor. Zabel and the men pushed Nathan and Thomas out. They were forced down the hall, to Zabel's office.

"Yes," Zabel continued. "Once, he was worshipped as a god himself, along with Inana, his necromancer. But he had enemies. The family of your wife held him back, and somehow, you triumphed over Inana. For a while, the followers of Nergal were aimless. We had hidden ourselves in society through various ways over the years. In recent times, we worked in security as it gave us a way to search for our foes. We looked for ways to open the door once again. In the end, I became the new necromancer, for I discovered this."

He pulled the Eye of Sin from his pocket and put it on as they reached the office door.

"With this, I contacted Nergal," Zabel told them as they went in. "Nergal came into me. Now, we are one. The lesser spirits with him, former followers before me, have become extensions of him as well. Soon we...I... shall have my kingdom on Earth.”

The desk was flanked by a metal panel containing a tablet. Opposite the tablet was a computer terminal. The monitor was lit with a red spider logo, while the main circuits were attached by a cable to something in the board room. Dr. Blythe Harlan was intently typing in commands on her keyboard.

"I found a means to open the door to the Inverted Kingdom, using both natural and supernatural means," Zabel / Nergal said. "The original way was shut, but I hired researchers to make new 'tablets'. After all, the way to open the door is a matter of energy, so these utilize power generated by your modern society.

Formidable in its own way, I only needed to add my own stamp to breach worlds. Inana never understood such things. She never saw its potential for greatness."

They walked through the office, following the floor cable. Passing the desk, they walked into the board room, where the cable hooked into a surveillance camera. Nathan looked around and saw that the room was otherwise bare, save for a small circular altar. Nergal walked over to it.

"You are to be a witness to the arrival," Nergal told them, concentrating on the altar. A flame spontaneously ignited in its midst. "The spell will be spread via camera to all the computers containing my new tablets. The tablets will open doors all over this area. My followers and anyone else nearby will face possession. My prowlers will follow, to stalk their prey. You will watch

everything you tried to protect burned down. Then, I'll kill you."

Nergal raised his hands over his head, chanting in his lost, forgotten language. Nathan and Thomas watched, frozen with horror and fascination, as a glowing red mist appeared over the fire. The smoke grew, and began filling the room, giving it a smell like a charnel house. Soon, it grew so hazy, that both the altar and necromancer became hard to discern.

The camera in the board room was transmitting a message to the computer station, which in turn, was signaling the other Zabel computers. But the image on the monitor wasn't the ritual in the board room. The red spider logo remained, only it was glowing brighter, as if the camera was only picking up the light.

The glowing monitor was having an effect on the metal panel as well. The 'tablet' etching was also

beginning to glow a red color. Smoke began swirling on the surface of the panel, and the tablet disappeared. Voices whispered in the same language as the chanting, and dark shapes appeared among the mists.

Harlan looked over her shoulder, and quickly leapt to her feet. She saw the spirits, but before she could react, her head swam, and she began coughing. Little had she known, that once she had done what Nergal wanted, he would no longer see any use for her...

XI

It was after hours at city hall, and the security guard on duty watched Ellis Harlan seated at a computer terminal. Technicians also milled about, checking connections. The guard knew that the security software needed an 'upgrade', but all he had seen Dr. Harlan do

so far was punch a few random keyboard sequences and stare at the red spider screen saver.

The guard stood behind him, and in front of the panel on the room's far wall. He was getting impatient for Harlan to finish so he could escort them out and begin his regular rounds. He didn't understand why this had to be done now, anyway.

In Harlan's defense, neither did he. He was just doing what his mother and Mr. Zabel had told him to do. Maybe, since it was supposed to incorporate teleportation, they wanted to keep it quiet in case there were any problems.

"Are you almost finished?" the guard asked for the third time.

"It will be very soon now," Ellis replied, not looking at him.

The guard sighed and continued to wait. As he did, he noticed something strange. The spider's body on the screen began to glow a bright red, bathing the room in its light. For a moment, he thought he actually felt a draft behind him, as though a window had been opened. But they were in an enclosed, interior room.

Harlan stood, and looked at the panel behind the guard. "It works," he said, a smile on his face. He could see figures moving through the panel. What an achievement this would be. He and his mother were sure to get recognition, maybe even Nobel Prizes...

But the shapes emerging were not security guards. They were about half as tall as he was, and moved with a shuffling gait. Their bodies were covered with shaggy, matted hair, and their hands and feet had sharp yellow nails. There was no head; where the neck should have been was a mouth filled with razor sharp teeth.

The creatures had no eyes, but turned towards the security guard and Ellis. They pounced on the guard, and Harlan ran, screaming, from the room. He shut the door behind him, hoping to slow them down.

But as he hurried down the hall, he heard a crash. Turning around, he saw the door knocked off its hinges, and the prowlers running towards him. Despite their awkward movements, they covered ground fast, and Ellis had to hurry to get to the other end of the hall.

He ran past the elevators, opting to take the stairs instead. He figured that if he had used the elevator, he could get trapped in the event of a power outage. Besides, he wasn't about to wait for it.

More frightened than he had ever been, Ellis had to concentrate just to keep his balance as he ran down the stairs to the lobby. Behind and above him, prowlers followed, but on stairs they couldn't move quite as fast,

so Ellis beat them to the front door. He ran out of the building, literally praying that he would survive.

Kevin, Helen, Kathy, and Mike watched the news in silence. The reporter stood in front of a building on fire. Inside, they could see dark shapes in the windows that somehow didn't look human. On the front steps, security guards were throwing stones and shouting at police cars parked outside. The officers were shouting back, and firing shots when they could. At the front of the stairs was a dead police dog that had been gunned down minutes before.

"I am reporting live in front of city hall where a full scale riot is in effect," the reporter told the viewing audience. "We only know that earlier tonight, technicians from Zabel Security Systems were working on an upgrade. The technicians have inexplicably gone

berserk. Joined by a few of the guards, they began smashing everything in sight, prompting the systems to alert the police. Now, they are engaged in a standoff."

The camera momentarily flickered to the riot, showing several men who somehow looked dazed. Their movements were pronounced, jerky, as if they were being pulled by something else. Then the camera went back to the reporter. She was wearing an earpiece, and her hand went to it, as though listening. She nodded, and turned her attention back to the camera.

"We have just received reports of other riots, both here and in surrounding towns. They seem to be coordinated. The sheriff is advising all people to get home as quickly as possible and lock their doors. No reports yet as to what is happening or why."

A scratching sound caused Kevin to look up warily. Mike went over to the door. Looking through the

peephole, he could see nothing at first, but the scratching continued.

"Mike, get away from there," Helen warned. Her eyes widened, as though she suspected what was about to happen.

Mike heard a growl, and looked through the hole again, only down this time. Three dark shapes were pawing at the door. He jumped back just as the door began to splinter. They were clawing their way through.

“Kevin, get off the bed!" Helen shouted. Kathy helped him as they threw the covers off, and pushed it over to the door. Mike helped them flip it on its side, and they pressed against the widening hole in time to see a claw start to break through. All of them, even Kevin with his one good arm, pressed against the bed as it rattled and the growls beyond gave way to roars. They prayed

that the metal and plastic would hold longer than the wood.

Zabel / Nergal stepped away from the portal, hoisted Nathan up by the shoulders, and threw him to the wall.

"You die first," Nergal hissed.

Nathan winced, and felt his arm from where he had impacted the office wall. It was bruised but not broken. Thomas tried to run to his aid, but the technicians, now possessed, held him back with even greater strength than they had before.

Nathan staggered to his feet, and held up the cross that was in his pocket. Nergal flinched, but was too powerful to flee at the mere sight of the symbol. He struck out with his fist, and hit Nathan on the jaw, knocking him backwards. Nathan remained standing, but before he could move, Nergal was in front of him,

lashing out with his fists. The demon used his possessed body to give Nathan a beating and Nathan felt himself losing focus. Nergal felt too much rage at his enemies to kill them instantly. He would inflict pain first.

Nathan felt himself losing focus, but amazingly, still had the cross in his hand. It began to glow faintly, with an unearthly white glow. Nathan felt the presence of the One who had hung on a cross long ago, aiding him even here, in the presence of the enemy. With the presence came the knowledge of what he must do.

With a strength he never knew he had, perhaps not his own, Nathan jabbed the cross into Nergal's chest. Nergal screamed and fell backwards, as the embedded cross instantly burst into flame. Slowly, still disoriented from the blows, Nathan stood, and watched the writhing form on the floor.

The clothes burned away from the body, revealing dried flesh. Around his neck, the Eye of Sin cracked and broke into pieces. As the cross burned away, the flesh flaked off, revealing bones. These crumbled into dust, revealing a shadow of a being that had sought freedom and power. It had only found slavery to its own evil and now, destruction.

The men holding Thomas screamed, and fell to the floor. Thomas ran to Nathan, helping him stay standing. In the portal, they saw a ziggurat collapse on itself and break into rubble. Other shadows could be seen as well. Nathan felt that the living members of Nergal's cult would follow suit, but had no time to contemplate such things.

The shadow that had been Nergal reached out and grabbed his leg. A wind picked up, blowing Nergal back into the portal where the Inverted Kingdom was

dissolving. Without his strength to sustain it, both it and the souls would go into hell, having only memory and impotent fury to accompany them on the way. Nathan felt himself being pulled after Nergal; with his last strength, the demon would see its enemy perish.

Thomas held on to Nathan, and pulled him back. He kicked over the camera that was connected to the computer terminal, knocking the power cables out. The mists in the panel began to fade, and the view of the cavern grew fainter. Nergal continued to slide back into it, and his shadow came into contact with the portal. Finally, Nergal lost his remaining strength, and let go of Paxton's ankle. The defeated shadow flew into the panel, and the view of the mists vanished. Only a wrecked piece of machinery remained. It sparked, and the nearby table caught fire.

Turning to go, they saw the corpse of Dr. Harlan. There was no blood or gore, but it unnerved them nonetheless. The fire began to spread, and the air filled with smoke just as an alarm began to sound.

"No time!" Nathan shouted. He staggered to the door, assisted by Thomas. He had been hurt, but nothing had been broken. Furthermore, he felt strength being returned to him, even though the cross was gone. "Run!"

They went into the hall. An explosion from the office made them turn back. The office interior had burst into flame. The floor was now littered with smoldering pieces of electronics, and the desk was ablaze.

"Come on!" Nathan said. They went to the stairs and descended into the main lobby. The flames followed, for they weren't fueled entirely by natural means. They ran out of the main entrance, and into the night, just as the ground floor caught fire too.

After reaching the outside, Thomas radioed for a police car. Nathan watched the Zabel building burn for several minutes. What was to become the center of a demon's earthly realm was now so much ruin. Fire and ash were all that remained of the Cult of the Inverted Kingdom.

He was drained, but happy at the same time. It was over. After years of hope, prayer, preparation and worry, it was finally over. The Savior had brought him through, had carried him with His own hands as he always had.

Epilogue

The squad car came in, and Thomas ordered his colleague to drive them back to Whately. As they drove, they listened to the radio.

"The latest report from Oakwood town hall is that the riot has ended," a reporter's voice said. "Repeat, the riot is over. Just moments ago, the guards and

technicians collapsed on the ground. Police moved forwards to apprehend the rioters, who offered no resistance. I'm standing now with the County Sheriff."

"All the technicians from Zabel Security Systems are dead," the sheriff's voice announced, disbelief in his voice. "The others were somehow knocked unconscious, but are coming to. The cause of death in the technicians is unknown."

"What is the state of the other men now?" the reporter asked.

"Exhaustion mixed with fear. They claim to have been under control by someone else. They also claim to have seen wild animals, although we have found nothing more than piles of hair around the premises. Many of the victims and rioters are in a state of shock and are praying frantically as we speak."

"There are reports of other riots ending in much the same manner," the reporter told the audience. "We will have more on this story as it develops."

A fire truck came by, heading for the Zabel building as they pulled back into Whately. Thomas and Nathan made it back inside, and went to Kevin's room. They saw three piles of hair and a busted door, and quickly ran over. Mike and Helen were moving the hospital bed out of the way when they saw the two men.

"Nathan?" Helen asked, uncertainly.

He walked over and hugged her. "I'm all right," he said.

"Mom? Dad?"

Vinnie came in as well. Somehow in the chaos, she had gotten out of the psych ward and made it down to her parents. In spite of everything, her thoughts were for them and their safety. Kevin and Kathy hugged her.

"I have you," Kevin whispered. "And I'm not letting you go."

Curse of the Necromancer

I

Nathan’s eyes snapped open as the alarm went off. Grunting to himself, he threw the covers off, stood, and switched off the alarm on his nightstand. As he did every morning, he perused the pictures of his family hanging on the wall.

From left to right, they told the story of his family. The left picture showed him, his parents, and his sister when they were still children. Then there was his wedding picture with Elaine, looking forever young and beautiful in her white gown. After that was Helen’s wedding picture; Nathan had been best man. Then there was a baby picture of his nephew, Mike, and finally, a recent picture of Mike and his girlfriend, Vinnie, in front of the local college where they were now attending classes.

Nathan hoped their relationship would be happier than either his or his sister's had been. They had both lost their spouses, and now spent more time alone than they had in marriage. While Nathan had long since come to grips with that, now that he was older and semi retired, he found himself wondering what he was going to do with the rest of his life. He had done some great things, but what was left? What else could God have for him to do?

He walked into his bathroom to trim his beard, ironic since he had long since let his hair and dress go. Looking at himself, he thought of his latest job. Last night, two employees had driven north to a Lagoda, Indiana, to pick up a shipment of furniture for a client moving into the Howard Phillips Retirement Home here in town. Nathan needed to get there in about half an hour, to oversee and help with moving the furniture into

the apartment of Mr. Marquette, the home's newest resident. As he finished trimming, he anticipated an easy but dull day.

The retirement home, located just minutes away from his house, was a large red brick building. Three stories tall, it housed a few hundred residents, most of which were fairly independent, although the left wing of the building had a smaller assisted living section. Connecting the two wings was a central area housing the offices and communal dining room. The kitchen and laundry areas were located in the basement; Nathan knew all of this because he had worked there in his late teens. Although his father had started the moving company that he now ran, he had been adamant that both Nathan and Helen get work experience elsewhere as teenagers, so that they could see how other jobs were,

and so that they would not think anything was just being handed to them.

He saw one of his vans pulled up by the front door, so he parked in the lot and walked over. His two employees had the back door of the truck open, and were beginning to unload furniture. Nathan waved to them, and then turned his attention to a man standing in the front door.

The man appeared around sixty, and had thinning grey hair. Very tall and thin, his features suggested mixed Spanish and French ancestry. Nathan felt mild surprise; while fur traders had travelled up and down the Mississippi, exploring the back country that would one day be the Midwest, the man looked more like someone who would be native to Louisiana, despite the man's claim over the phone that Indiana was the only state he had ever lived in.

“Mr. Marquette?” Nathan asked, holding out his hand.

“Yes,” the man answered, shaking the mover’s hand. “My apartment is on the first floor. You shouldn’t have to stay long.”

“That’s no trouble,” Nathan assured him. “I don’t have many other jobs this week.”

The man looked around nervously. “Well…shall we get started?”

“All right.” Nathan and another employee picked up a piece of furniture, while the third opened the door.

Marquette stepped around, and led them down a hall. He turned a corner and walked down several doors. Nathan and his employees spotted an open door and walked in. One of the smaller apartments, it had only a living room, counter for light cooking, a built in fridge and stove, and a bedroom with a small bathroom off to

the right side. This one didn’t even open to the outside, as some of the others did.

“Not much room,” Nathan commented, trying to make conversation. While not overly social, he always tried to show courtesy.

“It’s only me,” Marquette replied. “I’m finally out of Lagoda, and hope to stay here the rest of my life. Put the dresser in the bedroom please, alongside the hallway.”

Nathan nodded, and complied. “It’s not a bad place, once you get used to it,” he commented. “There was the Zabel incident, but the town has recovered nicely.”

“Oh, I don’t plan on going out much,” Marquette answered. The nervousness flashed back into his eyes, but the older man seemed to be actively trying to hide it. Nathan felt a flash of curiosity; what was the man thinking about? Was he lonely? Afraid to die? The mover had seen people with those fears before, and yet,

something else seemed to be weighing on Marquette. He seemed to want to finish the job and stay indoors as soon as possible.

“Are you all right?” Nathan asked his brow furrowing.

Marquette’s head snapped up, and he nodded. “Yes. Yes, I’m fine. Let’s keep going.”

Nathan nodded back, and his men continued to bring in the furniture. While it took several more trips, Marquette did not follow them back out. Instead, he remained inside, giving them instructions on where to place things. The final piece to be unloaded was a portrait of a nun, about one foot by two.

“That can go over the sofa,” Marquette told him.

“Who is she?” Nathan asked, instantly curious. Somehow his client didn’t strike him as a Catholic.

“A self portrait of my aunt,” Marquette said. “She was in the convent at Ferdinand. She always loved to paint.” He sighed. “She got away.”

Nathan looked at him, for his tone suggested that he was trying to convince himself of something.

Marquette looked at him sideways. “She had a hard home life,” he explained, though his tone was just slightly rushed. “At first, she joined the order only to get away. But in time, she grew to genuinely believe. She talked with me, through telephone, about the Savior.”

“I believe also,” Nathan said.

“But that won’t free you from harm.”

Nathan shook his head. “No, I realize that. Pain comes to good and bad alike. But God promises to be with us. He promises salvation.”

“Salvation, “Marquette repeated. “Salvation. Perhaps.”

Nathan finished hanging the picture, and then reached into his pocket. He pulled out a business card, and gave it to Marquette.

“Here’s both my work and home number,” he said. “I’ll send you a bill. If you have any questions or concerns, let me know.”

Marquette reached into his pocket, pulled out a cell phone, and put the number in. “Thank you.”

“Is there anything else I can do?” Nathan asked. For he felt a touch of pity for this strange, nervous man, alone in the world and afraid of something he wouldn’t quite identify.

Marquette looked at him as he turned to go. “Pray for me, Mr. Paxton. And pray you never see Lagoda.”

Nathan left shortly afterwards, the last words of his client echoing in his head. He wondered what exactly he had meant, but sensed that the conversation was over.

Nodding to the receptionist at the front desk, he walked back outside to his truck, while his two employees took the van back to their office. The sun was beginning to sink below the horizon, and night was coming.

II

Marquette tossed and turned that evening, trying in vain to sleep. He felt so tired from the long drive, yet too frightened to relax. If only his mind could slow itself for a moment, perhaps then he could lose himself in a temporary oblivion, so long as it didn’t become permanent.

He still couldn’t believe it. After years of mulling over the idea, he had finally found the courage to leave. He had done what everyone else in Lagoda wanted to do, but hadn’t.

He shivered, and pulled the blankets tighter around his body, despite the comfortable temperature. Of course, he wouldn't really know he had escaped until morning. He would be missed by now, and if they could come for him, they would do so immediately. Perhaps he should have gone even further, until he crossed the Ohio River into Kentucky. He seemed to remember reading somewhere that the supernatural couldn't cross over water, although he wasn't sure why.

Marquette peered out of his blanket to look at his nightstand. His clock read midnight and his cell phone was charging next to it. The dim light cast strange shadows on the walls, but otherwise, all was still and silent.

Then he saw the rustling of fabric out of the corner of his eye.

Instantly on guard, Marquette threw off his blanket and sat straight up. In the doorway leading to his living room, a figure stood, dressed in a nun’s robes. Marquette felt fear mixed with bewilderment, for the height and stance reminded him of his aunt before she made her own escape. Perhaps, he thought belatedly, he should have sought similar sanctuary, but he had rushed away without really thinking.

“Who’s there?” he asked, wanting to sound confident, but barely making it above a whisper.

The figure didn’t answer, but only stared at him.

“Aunt?” he whispered hopefully. “Is it you?”

No answer.

“Please. I need help,” Marquette continued. “You got away; please tell me how.”

The shape entered his room, but as it did, its form began to blur. The hope on Marquette’s face turned to horror, as he recognized the intruder for what it was.

“No!”

The phone rang, jolting Nathan out of a deep sleep. Groggily, he reached over to pick up his phone from the nightstand. Figuring it was his sister, he wondered what could possibly warrant such a late night call.

"Hello?" he mumbled.

But no corresponding voice answered. He heard a few banging noises, and then the phone clicked off.

"Hello?" Nathan repeated more forcefully. "Who's there?"

Only a dial tone answered, and Nathan, frowning, turned the phone over in his hand to see the caller ID. To add to his surprise, the name of Howard Phillips

Retirement Home flashed on his phone’s tiny screen. But he knew no one there, except for his latest client, Mr. Marquette.

Nathan stood up, turned on the light, and looked over the number for several minutes. Something was wrong; something about the call suggested trouble. Nathan felt a compulsion to do something about it.

There were times in the mover's life where he felt specifically led to certain places, or compelled to do certain things. It wasn't a voice on his head, or anything like that. Nevertheless, he felt certain that God himself sometimes wanted him for one task or another. He didn't know why him, for he was quite ordinary. Then again, didn't God usually choose the ordinary?

Well, Nathan thought, putting on a shirt and pants. *It would seem I have more to do after all.*

He made it to the home quickly; given the lateness of the hour, he faced no traffic, and soon found himself at the retirement home's front door. It was locked at night, but a receptionist was supposed to be on duty all night, in case of emergency. However, when he peered through the glass, he saw no one.

Nathan rang the buzzer several times, and banged on the door until he saw an overweight, middle-aged, tired looking woman come down the hall to the door. She frowned, and opened the door a crack to talk to him.

"I'm sorry," she grumbled. "I was on my smoke break. What do you want?"

"I'm Nathan Paxton," Nathan replied, speaking quickly. "I got a call from one of my clients, a Mr. Marquette. It's late, so I had to see if he's all right."

"I didn't hear anything," she replied. "No visitors allowed at night."

Of course you didn't hear, Nathan thought. *You were smoking.*

Driven by a sense of urgency, he pushed the door in, knocking the woman back. Despite his aging in recent years, he was still in fairly good shape.

"Hey!" the woman sputtered as Nathan forced himself in. He then marched down the hall, the receptionist following.

"You get back here," she demanded. "I'll call the police!"

"You may have to anyway," he muttered, without turning around.

The woman continued to shout at him, but he ignored her, and headed straight for Marquette's door. He jiggled the knob, and found it unlocked, so he stepped in and flipped on the light switch.

"How dare you?" the woman behind him continued. "You're trespassing, breaking and entering..."

She stopped in her tracks when she saw the state of the apartment. It had been ransacked; the coffee table was overturned, cushions were thrown off the couch, and the painting over the couch had been torn off the wall and thrown across the room.

Nathan stood in the middle of the room, dumbfounded and dismayed all at once. Judging from the room, he had come too late to help Marquette with whomever, or whatever he had struggled with.

"Mr. ...Mr. Marquette?" the woman behind him asked. She stepped around Nathan, looked around uneasily, and then headed for the door to the bedroom. Opening it, she stepped inside. Nathan didn't follow.

A scream came from the room, confirming the mover's fears. The woman ran out, her face filled with panic.

"Oh God, oh God," she said frantically, tears streaming down her face. She ran back to her desk, so she could call for help. Nathan, forgotten now, looked around the room, sighed, and slowly went back out in the hall to follow her.

That poor frightened man, Nathan thought. *What happened here tonight? What was he trying to hide from?* He looked up at the ceiling. *What was I supposed to do?*

He heard a very faint footstep, and whirled around. Walking down the other end of the hall, about a dozen doors away, was a figure dressed in black. He had his back turned to the mover, and was getting ready to turn another corner.

Nathan took a step forward, not really thinking about the danger, but merely reacting. He never asked for, or sought out excitement, but was no coward either. The 'man' turned around, and Nathan froze, cold sweat breaking out on his brow.

The figure was dressed in featureless black clothes, and its face was hidden by a porcelain mask. He couldn't see any eyes glinting through the disguise. Nathan opened his mouth to speak, but he felt an invisible force slam him against a door on the opposite side of the hall from Marquette's. His eyes involuntarily closed as he impacted the door, and when he opened them again, the masked figure was gone.

The door opened, and an elderly woman slowly emerged. She looked terrified, but not at Paxton. "Are you all right?" she asked.

Nathan nodded once, and the woman looked across the hall at Marquette's still open door. "He's dead, isn't he?"

"Yes," Nathan confirmed. "I couldn't do anything."

She shook her head, and shivered. "I heard the sounds. I'm sure we all did, but we were too scared."

Nathan heard the sound of sirens in the distance, and knew the police would soon be there. But the elderly lady, standing in her doorway, didn't seem to notice. She continued to shiver, and hugged herself to try and stop it.

"Something happened here tonight," she said. "I felt a presence. Something…evil."

"All right, Mr. Paxton," Detective Lynch said. He was standing over Nathan, while the mover was seated in a chair in the home's business office. It was early in the

morning, and Nathan had been answering questions for hours now. The policeman had tried to run the building's security camera, but for some reason, it had stopped working at the time of the murder.

"Let's have your statement one more time."

"As I said, officer," Nathan told him. "I moved Mr. Marquette in here yesterday afternoon. I gave him my number, as I do to all my clients. He dialed it a few hours ago, and I came over because I heard sounds of a struggle."

"Didn't it occur to you to call 911 instead of rushing over yourself?" Lynch asked, in a patronizing tone.

"I just felt I should do something myself, that's all," Nathan answered, realizing that it didn't sound convincing. But he wasn't about to tell the police about his compulsion. He doubted anything he said would change the detective's mind about him anyway.

As if to confirm his last thought, Lynch frowned and folded his arms. "So, you thought you could do police work, did you?"

"Officer, I saw a man leave the scene," Nathan replied, trying to avoid a fight. Although introverted, and somewhat moody by nature, he still didn't enjoy conflict. "He was dressed in black, and wearing a mask."

"But you didn't see where he went."

"No; I felt myself pushed backward. Ask Ms. Appleton, the old woman across from Marquette."

"I did. She makes even less sense than you."

Before Nathan could answer that, another policeman came in. He had been examining Nathan's cell phone, and now handed it back to the mover.

"Well?" Lynch asked his colleague.

"I looked at both Mr. Paxton and Mr. Marquette's phones," the man said. “The victim did indeed make a

call to Paxton around midnight. The receptionist also testified that he was locked out of the building at the time of the murder."

"All right," Lynch grunted. "I suppose you can leave. But stay in town, or have your phone on you for a few days in case we have any further questions."

"Yes sir," Nathan replied, standing up to leave.

"Paxton," Lynch called, just as Nathan reached the door. Nathan turned around, and Lynch scowled at him.

"I know you were friends with Detective Thomas before he retired."

Nathan nodded. Thomas had retired last year, and was now spending more and more time out of town, catching up with his daughter. Nathan had learned that Thomas had been married at one point, but his ex-wife had left him for another man. They had had one child,

and now the detective was making up for lost time with her.

"Well, the others on the force, myself included, don't take kindly to people who get in the way," Lynch said, cutting off his thoughts. "So, you stay out of this, and let me handle the investigation. Understood?"

"Yes sir."

"Go home, Paxton."

Nathan walked out without another word. As he left the building, he saw the faintest bit of sunlight in the east. Fatigue crept on him, and he felt a slight relief that he was off today. He didn't want to explain anything to his sister, who would probably be upset at his rushing over. She had worked hard at keeping their family together over the years, and wouldn't like him taking unnecessary risks.

As he got back into his truck, and pulled out of the home's lot, he wasn't sure why he had been there, anyway. Lynch, while belligerent, did have a point, and Nathan wondered at the compulsion now, too. Why hadn't he simply phoned for help, even though they probably wouldn't have gotten there in time either? Was it so he could see the killer?

Unbidden, Nathan remembered Marquette telling him something about not going to Lagoda. Was that it? Did some clue lie there?

III

Nathan slept until mid afternoon, and then walked a few blocks to the library. The compulsion to do something for or about Marquette hadn't faded, and he knew he would have to ignore Lynch. But he had never heard of Lagoda, so he felt the first step would be to

research it. He didn't have a computer at home; he never felt the need as he had one at his office for business purposes. Besides, he found he still enjoyed the occasional trip to the library.

He walked through the glass doors of a boxlike building made of limestone into the well lit, open lobby. The librarian nodded at him, but didn't say anything, and continued to peruse a romance novel in her hand. Although dour, and only rarely friendly, she would help when asked; Nathan had her find him obscure books on loan from time to time.

But he decided not to bother her this time, and walked past her desk. On the left was a row of computers for public use while on the right were movies for rental. The main book cases were past that, and the other end of the library was a reference section.

He walked up to a computer and logged in. No one else was in the library at the moment, so he figured he could take his time searching. The name of Lagoda kept echoing in his mind, so he decided to begin his search for answers there.

He found out that Lagoda had no home website, to his mild surprise. Even Oakwood had a home page, although it admittedly had a small college and retirement community. It had also made the news as far away as Indianapolis during the riots a few years ago, although no one liked to talk about that.

On an online atlas, Nathan did discover that the town was located a few dozen miles north, in a poorer county. It looked to have only a few hundred people, and had no national business chain of any kind, not even fast food. Nathan tried to search for more information but, oddly enough, a few other websites that were linked to

the atlas had been deleted. Nathan decided to try another route. Walking to the reference section at the back of the library, he looked into the Indiana and local history section.

He sat down at a desk by the reference books, and looked through a thick volume that was lying there. It contained a list and brief description of all Indiana towns. From that, Nathan saw that Lagoda had been founded in 1851 by a group of Creoles and former African slaves who migrated from Louisiana, tapped into the Underground Railroad, and made their way into Indiana through Jeffersonville.

Nathan's eyebrows shot up when he read that the settlers had passed through Oakwood before reaching their destination, and setting up their own town. After that, the history had nothing else to say. No one famous

had ever been to or come from there, nor had anything of historical significance ever happened.

Nathan shut the book, stood, and walked to the reference shelf by the desk. If there was any more information to be found, perhaps he could find it in the local history records. He had been surprised to find a reference to his town there, but he already knew that Oakwood had been part of the Underground Railroad at one point. In fact, his great grandfather's grandfather, one Jebediah Paxton, was said to have been a staunch abolitionist.

Finding a book about Oakwood's history before the Civil War, Nathan sat back down. It was little more than a scrapbook; old letters and official documents had been laminated and put together without any type of contents. He would just have to skim over the articles and hope

that he'd find what he was looking for. He still needed answers, and only remained with questions.

He turned a page, and marveled at what he saw there. An old grainy photograph stared back at him, and the caption read Jebediah Paxton and wife Dorothy. It was none other than his ancestor, although Nathan had never seen a photo of him before. A tall, thin rugged man with a long beard greeted him, alongside a woman dressed in a simple homemade dress and old fashioned spectacles. Nathan realized that while not doubles by any means, the two actually looked a lot like both him and Helen.

Slowly, mesmerized, he began to read the documents beside the picture. The next several pages in the book were fragments of a journal that Jebediah had kept. They told firsthand accounts of his helping runaway slaves, by giving them food and shelter for the

night on his old farm. In those days, Oakwood was little more than a farming community, and didn't grow to its present size until the 1950s.

Nathan found what he was looking for in the final entry of the journal. In it he read:

There was an unusually large group of refugees tonight. One was the family of Thomas, a former slave and overseer of his brethren, who had exchanged the laws of corrupt masters for the law of our Lord. Joining him and his kin are a few slaves who have joined him along the way.

There is another group as well, perhaps the largest group I've ever seen. Dozens of men, women and children, and not all slaves. There are whites with them, and they all seem to be a sort of unified group. They have been civil, but very standoffish, asking only to pitch camp on the edge of my land for the night.

So, they set up their tents of canvas and stayed to themselves while Thomas stayed closer to me and my family. I spoke with Thomas about his journey, but he seemed on edge. Through the window, I saw a few members of the other group carrying an oblong wooden box. They carried it into their camp, and I didn't see it again, but for the first time since coming to the Savior, I felt a sense of fear, as though I were being watched.

I asked Thomas if one of their own had died on the way, but he shook his head and whispered a plea for silence until they moved on.

"Why?" I asked.

"They aren't slaves, Mr. Paxton," he whispered tensely, his eyes never leaving the window. "A preacher man ran them out of Louisiana for their sins."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

But he would say no more until sunrise the next morning. Sometime before I awakened, the group had left. I never saw them leave, and don't know what became of them. What I did learn from Thomas chills my blood, and I only write it here because prayers alone will not completely drive out the fear.

Thomas told me that they were driven from the Deep South because their leader, one Lagoda, practiced some kind of witchcraft. For the light of our Lord doesn't shine in all places. There are dark places, secret places, both in Africa and America, where unclean spirits lurk, speaking to those who would hear. The group seeks a new home, to practice their rites undisturbed, Thomas told me. He said that the box has a life size wooden idol, and the spirits speak to Lagoda through it.

"I kept away, because they frightened me," Thomas said. "But one night, I heard the witch man chanting,

and I spied him through the trees. He had his idol propped up in a clearing. It's carved in the shape of a woman except…except for the eyes! Mister, I swear before God, the thing had living eyes! They looked all around, and I think it saw me, but the witch man didn't seem to notice. I swear to you, they are friends with the devil!"

Nathan put down the book, his own heart pounding with the fear of that long ago moment. It came through even now, through the account of it. To think that his own ancestor had had a brush with evil; he had, fortunately, been beneath its notice. He only read a few more pages after that, but there was nothing more to say.

It seemed obvious now, that this dubious group had founded the very town from which his latest client had

come. The very town that Marquette had somehow wanted to escape. He had tried, but had been murdered. Why? And by whom?

Nathan heard a footstep, and looked up. A silhouette, roughly man shaped, turned a corner, and walked between two rows of the books. Nathan stood up, closed the book, and stepped out of the reference section.

"Hello?" he called out, though not too loudly. He thought he was alone, but still didn't want to risk disturbing any patrons who might have come in. He walked down the main hall; the books were arranged in parallel rows on either side of him. Slowly, nervously, he turned to his right and went down the row where he thought he saw someone. He was still nervous from the account, but curiosity often overrode caution, and Nathan tried to get a glimpse of who was in the library

with him. At the end of the row, he saw a flutter of black cloth as a figure turned the corner, and walked along the walk space around the library wall.

Nathan thought he heard muttering, but couldn't make out any words. Slowly, fighting the urge to head back for the reference or front desk, he kept on. Could it be the killer? And if so, shouldn't he get help?

Nathan frowned at himself as he slowly, silently crept down the rows of old forgotten books. He had never been impulsive before, so why now? Curiosity, certainly. Guilt that he hadn't gotten to Marquette in time. But above that, he couldn't shake the thought in his head that there was something more he needed to do concerning the matter. He was aware of it, and felt that the choice of whether to listen remained his. He could just walk away, and go back to his job. But, to do that somehow seemed like a sin.

He looked down the rows of books, but didn't see anything. He strained to hear footsteps, whispers or breathing, but the only sound was the beating of his own heart. All else was silent.

Out of nowhere, a hand clamped down on his shoulder. Nathan suppressed a cry of surprise and fear. He whirled around to face his opponent, who turned out to only be the dour librarian. She made no apology for sneaking up on him.

"The library closes in five minutes," she told him.

Nathan had to swallow several times before he could answer. "All right," he finally said. He pointed to the reference section. "I was looking at a book there."

She shook her head. "Sorry, but references can't be checked out."

Nathan nodded. "All right," he repeated. "Thank you."

He followed her back to the main row, leading from the reference to the front desk. As he stepped out, the librarian locked the door behind him. Nathan saw that night had fallen, and realized just how long he had been in there. He was hungry; fortunately, he always had leftovers at home. Cooking for one was relatively easy if one didn't mind eating the same thing two or three meals in a row.

He thought about what he had learned, and wondered whether he should try to go to Lagoda to find out more. It would be a fairly simple drive, going up the nearest state highway for a few hours. The compulsion returned, so he made his decision.

Of course, he would have to call into work. If he did first thing tomorrow morning, he could tell one of his employees before his sister arrived to do paperwork. She'd be angry once she learned that he wasn't sick. She

might even figure out what it involved; Marquette's murder would no doubt be on the late news tonight. But he owed it to Marquette to find out the truth. Somehow, he had to know.

IV

A hot morning greeted Nathan as he pulled out of his driveway, and headed for the state road. He had made his call into work, and had fortunately missed Helen. He still felt somewhat guilty about that, but she wouldn't have stood for him going alone. She would have either argued with him, or insisted on going along.

Nathan smiled slightly as he turned a corner and left his neighborhood. In a few blocks, he would reach the state highway, and be on his way north. While Helen was younger, she often acted like the matriarch of the family. But Nathan, in turn, was protective of her, and that's why he had decided to leave her out of this.

He got on the highway, and left Oakwood behind. He would drive up two hours, refuel, and make the rest of the way into Lagoda. He estimated getting there by late afternoon on the back county roads.

Time and distance alike seemed to stretch on these out of the way routes. No matter how fast Nathan tried to go, the distance was what it was. He didn't listen to the radio like he usually did, for his thoughts crowded out any hope of diversion.

He stopped at a service station in Rodman, not unlike Lester's back home. He went to the counter, bought a sandwich for later, and prepaid for the gasoline. As he went back and refueled, he noted another car at the other pump. It was a young family, but they paid him no mind, and left as soon as they finished. Nathan wondered briefly what it would have been like if Elaine had lived and they had had children. He could see

the joy in taking part in new life, even as he recognized the horrors of the world. There were so many temptations, and many violent dangers that any young person would be forced to contend with daily.

Perhaps it was just as well that he hadn't become a father. But while the passing thought didn't really depress him, it still brought up the question of what he was supposed to be doing with his life, particularly now. Was there something in Lagoda? Or was he just imagining the compulsion after all?

He finished refilling and continued his journey. The ride remained uneventful as Nathan watched the scenery turn from farmland to woods and back to farmland. It was just as pretty during the day as it would have been spooky at night.

Finally, he passed a green road sign that simply read Lagoda. There was no welcome either in the sign or in

the farmland as it gave way to a small main drag. Nathan saw no stoplights, but only stop signs, so he knew that the town was even smaller than Oakwood. A fire department greeted him on the left, and a few small businesses stood on the right. A few side streets turned off, leading to a few blocks of houses before returning to rural pastures. There was neither town square nor any government building other than a post office next to the fire station. Somehow, it looked like it received very little business.

Nathan drove one more block, and pulled over in front of a small bar and grill. He was hungry, and the sandwich from the station hadn't been very filling. He walked up to the door, and looked at the sign. The words identified the establishment as the Main Street Pub.

Nathan opened the door, and stepped into the dimly lit place. Surprisingly, the place seemed fairly busy,

despite the lack of outside traffic. Booths lined the perimeter, and a few tables in the middle of the floor accommodated more patrons. Nathan looked around and saw mostly men, both white and black, drinking beer, smoking and conversing in low voices. All looked both tired and surly at once, and appeared to be regulars. Chances were, they all lived within walking distance of this place, which Nathan assumed to be the town's only diner.

Nathan walked up to the bar, trying to be as unobtrusive as possible. Now that he was here, he felt a sense of unwelcome. The few who bothered looking up confirmed that by eying him suspiciously.

The bartender, a large black man with several gold teeth, didn't smile when Nathan nodded a greeting at him. Nathan sat at a vacant stool, and looked over the bartender's head at a mirror on the back wall. He saw

the remaining patrons look at him another moment, and return to their own conversations.

"Can I have a burger and glass of water, please?" Nathan asked.

The bartender nodded, and stepped through a door to the side that led to the kitchen. Presently, he returned with the requested items.

"You new here?" the man asked after Nathan said a quick prayer and began to eat.

"I'm just passing through," Nathan answered in a neutral tone. After all, it wasn't technically a lie, and given the place's atmosphere, he didn't want to talk to anyone more than he had to.

"Good to know," the bartender replied. He stepped away to wait on another customer before Nathan could reply.

Nathan kept eating for a moment when he just happened to glance in the mirror again. Instantly, he dropped his last bite of food. Behind him, standing in the middle of the tables, was the masked figure from the nursing home.

V

Nathan whirled around, but the sight that greeted his eyes didn't match what he saw in the reflection. Gone was the mysterious figure. In its place stood a girl dressed in black, and wearing black gloves.

She appeared to be about twenty years old, but wasn't looking straight at him. Instead, she was standing over a table, having an argument with a couple of greasy looking men seated at a table. But Nathan could see her in profile, and noted her basic looks.

The girl was about half a foot shorter than him, and considerably thinner. Her skin was pale, and her hair

was as black as her clothes. The only spot of color about her were her vivid green eyes, although even they were surrounded with black makeup. Given that, the multiple earrings, and the somewhat spiky cut of her shoulder length hair, Nathan supposed her to be some type of Goth.

"I told you, no means no," she said to the men, who only grinned at her lecherously. Nathan felt himself tense up; he feared something bad was just waiting to happen.

"Come on, honey," one of them leered. "Don't be like that."

"I'm leaving," she announced. But as she turned to go, the man's greasy hand shot out and caught her by the arm. He stood, and his smile grew even more predatory.

"Oh, I don't' think so," he said. The other man laughed, and the bartender shook his head in disgust from where he was watching. The other patrons barely reacted at all, either too drunk or too indifferent.

Nathan couldn't believe it. Were they all going to sit there? Before he realized what he was doing, Nathan found himself sliding off his bar stool. Even in this ostensibly egalitarian age, Nathan still felt some protective instinct for the opposite sex. He had never seen the girl before, but knew she was in danger.

The girl tried to get away, her eyes widening with mingled anger and fear. "Let me go!"

"Make me," the man challenged.

She lashed out with her other hand and tried to hit him, but he saw it in time to parry it with his other hand. Then, he slapped her viciously, sending her sprawling.

Nathan's blood boiled and his fists clenched at his side. In three steps, he was next to her attacker. The man had just long enough to look over his shoulder in surprise before Nathan's fist connected with his nose. The man staggered back, yelling and clutching his face. The other jumped up and, with a curse, charged Nathan. The patrons began shouting and pointing as the man punched Nathan in the stomach. The mover felt the wind knocked out of him, but kept his balance and fought back. The first man, his nose bleeding, snarled, and tried to join the fight, but Nathan kicked him in the shin to keep him back.

The second man proved stronger, however, and delivered blow after blow on the mover, blackening his eye and bruising his face. Nathan struck back as much as he could, but this was the first brawl he had been in.

He tried to find a fast way to end it, but in the real world, knocking someone out was much harder than it looked.

"All right, break it up!" a voice shouted as a large shape came between them. The shouting slowly died down as Nathan's vision cleared. It was the bartender. He scowled at the fighters, but seemed angrier at Nathan, who did technically start the fight. As his head cleared, Nathan immediately thought of the girl he had been trying to defend. He looked around, but didn't see any sign of her. It would seem she had been smart enough to slip away when the men were distracted.

"You stay back," the bartender warned the two glowering men. The first one had a grimy handkerchief to his nose, and the other spat blood from a cut lip. But they obeyed, and the bartender turned back to Nathan.

"You," he whispered dangerously. "Get out."

Nathan nodded, and quickly, wordlessly, made his way for the front door. No one tried to stop him, and he stood outside a second later. Night was falling, and he looked up and down the street. No one was in sight, and his truck stood by on the curb. He shook his head in frustration. He had come here out of morbid curiosity to find out if he could learn anything about the murder back home. Not only had he learned nothing so far, but he had also gotten in a fight. Looking at the town's main street, he wondered now if he could find anything out.

He saw neither library nor records hall, and didn't expect anyone to talk to him. Would he be better off just going home and leave whatever was here alone? He sighed, and got back into his truck. Perhaps the best choice for now would be to sleep on it. He would find a motel in the next town, rest, and decide what to do in the

morning. He drove down the road, and turned a corner as the road curved to the right.

As he drove down past more old, closed shops and houses, he saw the girl walking down the side walk. She turned and looked at him just as he was about to pass. Although dark, she recognized him by the scant light of the few street lights, and waved to him. Nathan slowed down and pulled over.

"Hey," she began, studying his face. Her look changed from curiosity to concern. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine," Nathan assured her.

"You're hurt." The green eyes softened. "You did it for me. Thank you."

"That's all right. I couldn't just sit and do nothing back there." Nathan looked in his rearview mirror. No one had left the pub or had tried to follow him yet, but

he didn't trust his luck to hold out. "Are there any cops I can report those men to?"

She shook her head, and a shadow seemed to pass over her pale face. "None that you would want."

"What about a hotel?" Nathan asked.

"Probably several hours away." She looked around nervously. "Look, since you're here and all, could you give me a ride home? It's about five blocks down the last street on the right. I have a couch you could sleep on if you don't want to keep driving."

"I have business here," Nathan frowned. "But you would let a total stranger in your home? For the night?"

"I think I can trust you," she answered. "You have kind eyes."

"But I don't even know your name."

"It's Kayla. Kayla Griffiths."

"Nathan Paxton."

"Well, how about it?"

Nathan pursed his lips; he was reluctant, and felt awkward, but his eyes drifted back to the pub, and he knew he would have to get out of sight soon. Besides, he felt strangely drawn to the girl. It wasn't the same feeling as the compulsion to solve Marquette's murder, but felt just as strong. Indeed, the feelings seemed almost at war with each other.

Not that he felt amorous towards her. Although she wasn't unattractive, their age difference made that thought ridiculous. Besides, Elaine had been the only woman he had ever loved in that way.

The feeling was more one of protectiveness. His thoughts drifted back to what he had thought of earlier, about the prospect of fatherhood that had never come. If it had, if Elaine had lived long enough to have become a

mother, then he could imagine someone like Kayla as his daughter. Even her age was about right.

"Okay," Nathan decided. He opened the door, and Kayla sat in the passenger seat. "I appreciate it."

"It's the least I could do," Kayla replied.

He turned on the street he had indicated, and Kayla pointed to an abandoned looking shotgun house at the end of the road. Nathan noted that beyond it, the farmland gave way to woods.

"There," she said. "Once we're inside, you can tell me why you came here, of all places."

Half an hour later, Nathan sat on an old couch in a dimly lit living room. Scraps of wood and debris littered the area around him, and he could hardly believe anyone lived in a place like this. Kayla, meanwhile, had pulled up

a chair, and was gently dabbing his bruised face with a warm wet cloth.

Nathan told her all about the meeting with Marquette, his subsequent murder, the masked man, and his urge to come and learn why all this had happened.

"Do you really live here alone?" Nathan asked, after he had finished.

"I lived with my parents until about two years ago," Kayla said. "But one day, they didn't come home. I asked a few others, but they wouldn't say whether or not they had seen them. That's when I knew. They got them."

"They?" Nathan echoed. "Kayla…is there something wrong about Lagoda? I keep getting this feeling. I didn't tell you, but I also went to my town library. I found this strange story on how the town was founded."

"The cult of the idol?" Kayla asked. Nathan looked up, and his eyes widened in surprise, but he nodded slowly.

"It's true," she whispered, and looked around, searching for something that Nathan couldn't see.

"Why are you whispering?" he asked.

"You never know when they are listening," Kayla replied. "The spirits."

She stood, walked over to the window, and peeked out of the curtains. Then she turned back to him and explained.

"Everyone in this town is descended from the cult members who came here from the south. Their leader was a witch man. But his powers kept him from any slave owner. He gathered followers, and his children ruled over their children."

"How?" Nathan asked.

"He talks to the spirits. They spy for him, and enable him to inflict harm from far away. We all have to obey. Or else."

"What about the masked man?"

"One of the spirits. They make us obey him, and them. They won't

let anyone else in or out. That's why Marquette died."

She shuddered and sat down beside him. "I knew him. Not well, but we all know at least who everyone else is. I really thought that he'd be one of the few who had gotten away."

Nathan nodded sympathetically. "I'm sorry."

Kayla looked back at him for a long time, and Nathan was reminded of himself once more. He had been depressed for years after Elaine's death, and saw the same disillusioned look in those green eyes that he

once had. He wondered what this girl had seen and suffered in her life here. What would growing up in a place like this possibly be like?

She studied him for several moments as he mulled over everything.

"You've been hurt too, haven't you?" she asked suddenly.

He looked at her, startled, but supposing that it somehow showed on his face. So, he nodded in assent.

"Tell me."

He surprised himself by actually talking about Elaine. "I was married once, to the daughter of one of my college professors. She died. There was nothing I could do. She became sick, and withered away."

"Is that why you're here?" she asked. "To make up for not being able to help your wife? Is that the feeling that brought you to this place?"

"No, no, it's something else," Nathan replied. But her words made him doubt his feeling. Was he really confusing God's will with his own after all? It was an easy enough trap to fall into.

He looked at Kayla. "You mentioned a leader."

"Yes. Dr. Marcel Lagoda."

"Doctor?" Nathan echoed.

"Of course. Most of the Lagodas have been physicians. They learn to control the natural and supernatural that way."

"Where is he now?"

She shook her head. "Nathan. You can't do anything here. Stay with me tonight; you don't want to wonder in the streets after dark. Then go back home. Hope the spirits don't take notice if you don't try to fight them."

"I have to, Kayla. Don't ask me why; just tell me where I can find Dr. Lagoda."

She sighed, and shook her head again. "He lives at the end of this road. If you're determined to go, at least wait until dawn. Then I'll try to take you a back way."

"You don't have to do that. Especially if you believe it's that dangerous."

"I'm not a child anymore, Nathan."

Her words contained none of the petulance that they normally had when spoken by young people. Rather, it hinted at a person who had been aged far too quickly and far too soon by hardship.

Nathan said nothing, and Kayla stood. "Just try to sleep. You can have the couch. I'll be in the other room."

"All right."

"Good night, Nathan."

She went into the hall and turned a corner. Nathan heard a door shut a few seconds later, and sat quietly in thought. Kayla's words came very close to the truth,

although he didn't fully agree with her. But he remembered her warning about not going out at night. So, with a quick prayer, he turned off the light on the night stand, and slid into an uneasy sleep.

VI

He stirred several hours later, and got up. Quickly looking around in the dark, it took several minutes for his eyes to adjust, and his mind to remember where he was. Grunting, still tired, he began to lie back down.

But then, he heard a noise. His eyes snapped open, and he thought he saw a shadow pass across the front yard of the house through a crack in the curtain. He held his breath tensely, waiting to see what would happen. His gaze searched the dark for anything he could use as a weapon. His gaze rested on a two by four lying in a pile of clutter. Slowly, he stood, walked over, picked it up, and waited. No sound greeted his ears, and no shadows rose

up to threaten him. Briefly, he considered calling out to Kayla, but then a faint scratching sounded from outside the door.

Nathan tightened the grip on his plank, and walked over to the door. He threw it open and swung the board outside, but it only connected with empty air. No form could be seen there.

He drew in a deep breath, and walked outside. He looked from the left to the right, but the street was empty. No lights were on in any of the other houses; Nathan couldn't say for sure whether they were even inhabited.

Suddenly, a flicker of movement came from his left. Before even thinking about it, he swung and hit a dark shadow head on. A masked figure staggered back, and Nathan couldn't say whether it was the same one from the home, or a completely different one. But either way,

he had been stalked, and was now being attacked by an enemy who would see him dead.

The figure didn't speak, or make any kind of sound. But it quickly recovered, and reached out for him. Nathan tried to hit his opponent's arm, but the figure grabbed the board just as Nathan swung it, and yanked it from the mover's hands. The figure tossed it over its shoulder, and looked at Nathan with a cold steady gaze. An invisible force knocked him to the ground, and he looked up as the figure loomed over him.

A shot rang out, and the forehead of the figure's mask shattered. Silently, the attacker fell to the ground.

Nathan stood up, and looked back at Kayla's house in shock. The girl stood in the doorway, holding a handgun. She stepped out, and walked over to him. Before he could speak, she put up her hand.

"We'll call it even," she said.

Nathan walked over to the fallen body. After a moment's hesitation, he grabbed the broken mask and pulled it off the figure's head. He wanted to see what he was dealing with, and had a hunch that it wasn't merely a ghost.

The face that stared back at him with now lifeless eyes was a craggy faced man. He appeared to be of middle age, and his features resembled the bar crowd he had encountered earlier. The cheeks were sunken and the tongue was an unhealthy black, as though the man had been dead for a reasonably long period of time. Furthermore, the body had a strange odor, and the skin had a rust color, hinting at some artificial means of preservation.

"Kayla..." Nathan began.

"The spirits with Dr. Lagoda demand an occasional sacrifice in return for their...services," Kayla interrupted.

"These are supplied by the magician. The spirits use the bodies of the victims to walk among us. They grow stronger, and we can't be out at night, or else..." She pointed at the body.

A gust of wind blew from the main street. They turned to see three more masked figures walking down the road towards them. For they knew of their fallen comrade, and they knew who was responsible.
Kayla swore and pointed to a car on the street, "Come on," she said.

"Where?" Nathan asked. "You have a car?"

"I don't use it very often," she said, running to it. Fumbling in her pocket, she fished out a set of keys. "They watch, and notice what happens outside."

She unlocked the door and jumped into the driver's side. Nathan ran to the other side as she let him in. The masked men, the 'sacrifices,' saw them and began to run

faster. Kayla started the engine, and drove down the street. The sacrifices ran faster than humans, but not even they could keep up with a speeding car and fell behind.

"My car is faster than yours," Kayla said as they continued to drive. The town fell behind them, and they drove into the woods. The only light came from the headlights, but fortunately the road seemed straight.

"Where are we going?" Nathan asked, looking behind him. He saw no one, but didn't feel any safer. He did, however, feel the compulsion returning and, despite his fears, somehow sensed that he was going back in the right direction.

"I don't know," she answered, and a hint of panic entered the green eyes. "We can't escape; they're on to us."

Confirming her words, Nathan saw two more sacrifices jump out of the bushes ahead of them. They ran out, and stood in the middle of the road. It was too late to swerve out of the way, so Kayla gritted her teeth, and slammed on the accelerator. Nathan cried out as she ran them over, and he felt a sickening thud below his feet. He fought the urge to look back.

"Lagoda lives about a mile away," Kayla said. "I don't think he would call them off, but perhaps the sacrifices would be more careful the nearer we are to him."

They drove under a grove of trees, and a dark shape fell from an overhead branch to the hood. A sacrifice had jumped onto the car.

Kayla screamed, and her hands involuntarily gripped the wheel. She swerved back and forth on the road just as the woods began to thin out. Nathan looked past the

sacrifice, glowering at them through the mask. They were indeed coming upon a mansion.

The car suddenly flipped over, Kayla screamed again, and the sacrifice flew off the hood. Nathan's view inverted as the car rolled over on its top. The hood crunched, and the glass of the front windshield shattered. He felt his ribs crack on the impact, and the pain cut through him. Part of him wanted to scream and part of him wanted to check and see if Kayla was all right.

But darkness enfolded him, preventing him from doing either.

VII

When he came to, Nathan was in a large, well lit room. He looked around him, and saw white walls, scrubbed tile floors and counters that contained various surgical instruments.

Looking down on himself, he saw that he was lying on a table wearing nothing but a surgical gown. He remembered the car crash, and wondered just how badly he was hurt. Oddly enough, he felt no real pain, just a dull ache as though he had merely been working out rather than injured.

Reluctantly, his hand went to his gown. He brushed it aside, and received a shock. His chest was bruised, but his ribs were unbroken. Looking himself over, he saw no trace of any serious injury whatsoever. Yet, he knew that he had been in a car wreck and Kayla...

Kayla. Where was she? What had happened to her? Nathan carefully, hesitantly, tried to sit up, and found that there was no increase in pain. He looked around the room again, but saw no one else. Was Kayla dead? Or being held elsewhere? Where, for that matter, was here?

As if to answer his question, a door opened and a tall, powerfully built black man stepped in. He looked to be in his early sixties, was clean shaven, and was dressed in surgical scrubs. His gaze as he looked towards Nathan revealed nothing, but the mover thought he caught a brief glimpse of fear, as though, like Marquette, this man was haunted.

"Who are you? Where am I?" Nathan asked. His voice was dry, and he began to cough.

"I am Dr. Lagoda," the man answered in a deep bass voice. "Don't try to stand too quickly, Mr. Paxton. You were in a car wreck, and badly injured. I operated on you, but you have been unconscious for almost an entire day."

"But..." Nathan tried to protest. He pointed to his chest, but Lagoda held up a hand, and stepped back out of the doorway.

A moment later, he returned with a bundle: Nathan's regular clothes. He walked over, handed them to the mover, and headed back out.

"Get dressed, and meet me in the parlor upstairs. I will explain everything to you there."

He left, and Nathan checked the pants pockets. His keys were missing, but his wallet remained. Checking it, he found the spare car key he kept there, and wondered at the omission. Clearly Lagoda had examined the wallet, and discovered his name. But why take the keys and leave the spare?

He quickly dressed, and stepped out into the hall, dazed and sore, but otherwise in perfect health. He found himself in a cold, but clean hallway with brick walls. Sensing that he was in a basement room, he looked from his left to his right. To the left was another darkened surgical room. The door was opened, and

Nathan saw a few tables with body shaped objects on them. But they were covered with sheets, so Nathan couldn't be sure. He took a step towards the room, but then hesitated. Remembering the sacrifices, he decided that he wouldn't want to risk being trapped in the basement should anything happen.

He turned to his right, and saw a stairway. Walking up those, he saw that he was in another hallway. He walked down, and saw the house's main door on his left, while on his right was a staircase to the upstairs, and a third hallway. In this hall, he saw a room on the left with an open door and a light on. He walked to it, and stepped into a cozy looking library. A fire was burning in a fireplace, and two chairs were seated near it. Lagoda sat in one, and looked up at the mover.

"Ah, Mr. Paxton," Lagoda said courteously. He waved his hand at the other chair. "Please sit down."

"Where am I?" Nathan asked again. "Where is Kayla?"

Lagoda frowned. "Where you are, Mr. Paxton, is my house. But I know no 'Kayla.'"

"The girl with me," Nathan insisted. He walked over to his chair, but didn't sit down. "Is she hurt, too?"

"But there wasn't anyone else," Lagoda said. In his eyes, Nathan saw what he thought might be honest confusion. But he didn't know this man, or anything about him, save that he was very likely a conjurer.

"She met me here in town," Nathan said. "She came with me, but I haven't seen her here."

"I tell you, I've never heard of a Kayla," Lagoda said. "I know everyone in town. Believe me. Sit down, Paxton."

Nathan eyed him warily, but obeyed. "Now tell me, why are you here?" the doctor asked.

"I think you know that. Your sacrifices have been stalking me since Oakwood, where I first saw them," Nathan said, sounding bolder than he actually felt. But he sensed that God was with him, even here. The compulsion eased away, and he knew that he was now where he was supposed to be. Whatever now transpired would be in accordance with what God wanted for him.

"I see," Lagoda said, his eyes lost in thought. "Perhaps you have been. But the spirits are not my servants. They don't do as I wish all the time, nor do they tell me what they do."

"You don't know about Marquette?"

"I know he escaped from here. A difficult thing to do; the spirits don't allow it. Only a few have ever managed it." Lagoda raised his eyebrows. "Did he make it to your Oakwood, then?"

"He was murdered. That's why I came to investigate."

Lagoda shook his head. "I am truly sorry for that. I doubt you'll believe me, but I didn't kill him. The spirits did."

Nathan grew more confused every minute. Here he was, in the presence of the man who was supposed to be in charge of the spirits, only to hear the man deny the ability or even knowledge of their actions. Was it some type of trick? What was really happening here?

"I don't understand," Nathan confessed. "Don't you have control of what goes on here?"

"My family's relationship with the spirits should be thought of as an alliance more than anything," Lagoda said. "I used them to heal your wounds, but it was difficult. They didn't want to use their powers for good."

"How is it that you healed me, when another man was murdered?" Nathan asked.

"It is a long story, Mr. Paxton," Lagoda said. "My ancestors served Inana, the necromancer of Apsu."

Nathan's head snapped up, and Lagoda nodded. "Yes, I know about your involvement with her. She sent my ancestors and some of her spirits to America ahead of her main cult in order to spy out the country and find the Beaumonts. My father found out they had settled in Oakwood, and informed Inana."

Nathan took all this in. "I thought her legacy ended with the riots," he said at last.

"At first, Inana, then Mr. Zabel, was content to leave us be after we fulfilled our duties. But after they were defeated, the spirits grew more aggressive. They demanded more autonomy. They wanted to have more sacrificial bodies to walk in."

"The masked figures," Nathan said.

"The chief spirit had inhabited a wooden idol. It has gained the ability to move on its own. I don't think it will even spare me before too much longer. They have begun to do things I didn't order, like Marquette's murder."

Nathan reached under his shirt. He pulled out a cross necklace, one he had purchased to replace Dr. Fowler's old cross. "You're still alive," Nathan said, holding the cross to Lagoda. "Go to Him, while you still can."

Lagoda shook his head. "There is no power in an object. Only the one behind it."

But he did take the cross. He prayed silently to himself for several minutes. Nathan sat in silence, trying to understand all that had been told him that night. Then the physician looked up at Nathan, and returned the cross to him. The fire flared up, and the air grew hotter.

"I'm going to die tonight, Mr. Paxton," Lagoda whispered. He stood up and began to pace the room. "They are coming. I know it."

Nathan felt a strange presence, and he too stood up. He looked around but saw nothing. In the past, the air had chilled when the supernatural invaded. Now, however, the air was hot, and a sense of anger, not his own, pervaded the room.

"Go, Mr. Paxton," Lagoda said. "You cannot help me any more than you already have. Not here anyway."

"What am I supposed to do?" Nathan asked, not sure whether he was asking the doctor or God.

"Find the idol and destroy it," Lagoda said. The heat in the room went up another notch as he said. "That is the spirit leader's connection to this world. If it goes, she will lose her tie here, at least until she can establish herself elsewhere."

"How am I supposed to find it?" Nathan asked. "It moves on its own, according to you."

"It may well seek you out," Lagoda answered.

Nathan reached out, and clasped the doctor's hand. The man had surprised him; where he had expected a monster, he had instead found another victim. The necromancer's legacy had continued, even after the deaths of the leaders.

"Thank you, Paxton," the doctor said.

Nathan saw a black mist forming in front of the fire. Through it, he saw the outline of a sacrifice forming, and knew he would have to run.

"One more thing," Lagoda said. "As I prayed just now, I saw a woman. A beautiful lady with black hair and eyes. She said that you would be with her soon."

Nathan swallowed once, feeling uneasy, but not really knowing how to take that. He let go of the doctor's hand, turned, and walked out into the hall.

The door blew shut behind him, and he heard the sounds of a scuffle. "I turn from you," he heard Lagoda say, muffled behind the door.

But the sounds of struggle only increased, and Nathan ran down the hall for the house's front door. As he passed the hall to the basement, he heard footsteps, and turned. He saw sacrifices walking up the stairs.

They saw him, and Nathan thought quickly. Pulling up a chair, he shut the door, and jammed the furniture piece under the knob to bar it. The sacrifices on either side of the door pounded on it, but the barrier held long enough to allow Nathan to run outside the front door. He ran out into the night, not sure where he was going, but knowing that he had to get out of the way. A

crackling sound pierced the silence, and Nathan looked behind him.

The house of Dr. Lagoda had burst into flame. Whatever had happened there, it appeared that the doctor had lost his battle with the forces that assaulted him. On the other hand, Nathan prayed that he had found the courage to give himself to God in the meantime.

Nathan looked about him, and saw that he was in a large clearing. The trees were far enough away to not catch fire themselves, but not so far that he didn't feel penned in. He was standing in a large driveway that led back to the main road. He was just wondering what to do next, when he saw two headlights, turning into the driveway.

Nathan wondered who it could possibly be. He didn't know how the townspeople would react to the doctor's

death, and figured that, once he got back to his truck, that he should drive north and return to Oakwood by circling around. He had no idea where to find the idol, or what had became of Kayla.

But, to his surprise, he found an answer when the headlights reached him. For there was his own truck, and Kayla was seated at the wheel. How she had escaped and returned, Nathan couldn't tell. She didn't look at all injured, but Lagoda had denied even seeing her. Had he lied? Or was there something more to it?

"Kayla! What happened?" Nathan called out.

But the girl pulled up beside him, and jerked her head in the direction of the passenger's door. He got in, and they began driving. Kayla then began speeding up.

“Hey, slow down,” Nathan warned as they accelerated down the narrow road. "I don't think we're in..."

He broke off when he looked at her. Before she had been dressed head to toe. But now, she only wore shorts and a black tank top. He got a look at her arms and shoulders.

They were made of wood, not flesh. The skin only seemed to be around her head and neck.

"No," Nathan whispered, drawing in a deep breath. Suddenly, he understood. Kayla looked at him, her green eyes blazing with fury. He remembered Lagoda's last words, and realized that he had been found by the idol.

VIII

With one hand still on the wheel, Kayla reached out to him with her other arm. Nathan yelped and opened his door, jumping out of the car. Fortunately, he landed off the road in the grass, and avoided being skinned. He still felt banged up, though, and had to stagger to his feet.

Panicked, he wasn't really sure what to do. The truck slammed on its brakes, and turned around. Nathan realized that he'd have to stay in the woods, or else she could easily run him down with his own vehicle. He saw the truck speeding to him, and he turned and ran into woods.

The truck stopped just before it hit the trees, and Kayla got out. Though they weren't exactly glowing, Nathan could see and, even more importantly, feel the eyes of his enemy on him. He ran into the woods, but didn't want to run too far, for fear that something else might be hidden there, waiting for him.

Then, he had an idea. It was so obvious that he wondered why he hadn't thought of it before. It was really the only solution that didn't either involve him being killed or Kayla escaping and going into hiding. For if he allowed that, she would only remain to continue

plaguing the town. Worse, she might very well follow him to Oakwood, and threaten his loved ones. That he must not allow.

He ran back towards the burning house through the trees as fast as he possibly could. He looked over his shoulder and saw Kayla gaining on him. But she didn't think to go back to the truck, and Nathan silently thanked his maker for that.

He emerged from the woods, and reached the front porch. The flames had consumed it relatively quickly, having been caused by supernatural rage. The porch had actually collapsed, and a piece of burning wood lay within his grasp. Nathan smiled grimly. Perfect.

Kayla followed, but as Nathan slowed and bent over, she seemed to realize what he was doing. Her expression of anger changed into one of shock as the mover stood

back up, holding a flaming piece of wreckage. She didn't speak, but merely looked at him.

Her eyes softened, and almost seemed to plead with Nathan. He wavered for a moment, remembering the compassion he had felt for her before he knew what she was. How he had envisioned her as the daughter Elaine had never given him. How all his past pains and regrets had resurfaced when he had tried to protect her. Because, he couldn't protect Elaine or Marquette. Because destroying her now wouldn't change the past.

Nathan shook his head to clear the thoughts away. For now, he saw the truth. This was some kind of mind game she was playing. Probably, she had been doing so since the first time he saw her. That was why his compulsion had become muddled around her.

As he shook his head, she slowly approached, keeping the pitiful look on her face. But her face and her

movements remained worlds apart, as she reached out to grasp him.

Nathan threw the makeshift torch at her suddenly, finding a resolve he hadn't had a moment ago. She shrieked as her clothes caught fire, but she didn't run away. Her feet seemed to glue to the spot where she stood, even though she writhed with what looked like pain. Nathan straightened up, grabbed another flaming log, and threw that at her to fuel the fire.

Her clothes burned away, revealing not a naked body, but a wooden idol. Her hair and face burned off like paper peeling back from a fire starter. Beneath was no skull, but a carved wooden effigy. The eyes, however, remained human. They stared back at him, even as the screams died out and the struggles of the idol grew stiffer and less pronounced.

Soon, only a wooden statue remained, burning steadily as it was dry and untold centuries in age. Nathan stared back as the arms fell off, and continued to burn away into coals. The eyes looked on him with impotent hatred, as it assessed the agent of its defeat.

Nathan didn't answer, but only watched in silence, breathing heavily as the idol continued to burn. Not taking any chances, he walked back to the house and grabbed another beam. He swung it at the idol's middle, breaking it in two so that it would burn faster.

Finally, all that was left were a few ashes and coals. The eyes went out, and Nathan breathed a sigh of relief. The spirit behind the idol had lost its connection with the world. Now, it could only wander aimlessly, until it found another willing to summon it. But the town of Lagoda was now free, though they didn't know it. Marquette and Dr. Lagoda were avenged.

Exhausted, but not wanting to remain, Nathan staggered back to his truck. He thought of Lagoda and his mistakes. He thought of how another legacy of the necromancer had been snuffed out. He wondered how many more there were. He also wondered about the doctor's final words to him. He supposed he would find out their meaning soon enough.

His ribs ached as he entered his truck. The keys remained in the ignition, so he drove away, unseen.

Whately Hospital

I

Alone, unseen, a single truck drove down a foggy stretch of state highway. Its driver glanced nervously in the rearview mirror. The only thing that greeted him was his own haggard reflection. Long grey hair and a full grey beard framed a face whose blue eyes had seen more than their owner would care to admit.

A sign appeared off to the side of the road, telling Nathan Paxton that he had returned to his hometown of Oakwood, Indiana. The foggy desolation gradually gave way to homes and then the buildings of the town's small businesses. One of them was the moving company that

his family had owned for years, but right now, his job wasn't where he was headed.

Nathan grimaced, and took one hand off the steering wheel to clutch his side. He had been in an accident while out of town, and was trying to make it to Oakwood's Whately Hospital before he passed out. He probably shouldn't have tried to drive there himself, but things had happened so fast.

He felt something wet, and pulled his hand away. Sure enough, blood was soaking through his flannel shirt, and he shivered despite the fact that, even with the fog, it was a warm night. Nathan knew that he had cracked several ribs; who knew what other damage he had done to himself?

He passed the town square, and knew he only had a few blocks left to go before he made it to the ER. Maybe, he could get patched up as an outpatient and simply take

a few days off work without alarming his sister, Helen. Nathan knew she would worry about him, and he never wanted to cause his family undue worry.

Unfortunately, his body seemed to have other ideas. Another surge of pain jolted through him, and he gritted his teeth to keep from crying out. His eyes began to water, blurring the road ahead, but Nathan pushed on. Presently, the hospital came into view. It was a small place, only having about fifty beds. The third floor was a psych/ Alzheimer's ward while the lower floors housed the regular patients.

Nathan turned into the parking lot, and drove for the entrance to the emergency room. He knew that he was supposed to stay out of the ambulance parking zone, but his head began to swim, and he didn't think he would get that far.

At the door, a lone security guard stood watch. He shook his head, and went outside to intercept Nathan as he pulled his vehicle in and shut off the ignition.

"Sir," the guard called out. "Sir! You have to park in the lot. This area is for..."

Nathan opened the door, but before he could step out, he gripped his side as it began to throb again. He fought to remain conscious, but to no avail. The security guard's jaw dropped in shock when he saw Nathan's bloody side. Before Nathan could cry out for help, he slumped over the wheel, and his vision darkened.

The next thing he knew, Nathan was on a road, walking. He hadn't exactly awakened, but merely found himself somewhere else, at some other time. Wherever he was, it was daylight; the sun shone overhead in a clear blue sky. The dirt road led by a forest of assorted

oaks, poplars and beech trees, untouched by human 'progress.'

Nathan looked down, and saw that he was wearing the same clothes, but they were no longer blood soaked. He felt his side, and discovered that the wound he had suffered was now healed. His brow furrowed. Was he dead? Was he walking towards the Savior now? It didn't look like the accounts people talked about, but then there had never been any guarantees that it would.

Presently, he came upon a clearing. A small house stood there with a couple of cars in the driveway. Nathan noticed something odd. Not only was the driveway unpaved, but both cars were vintage. Nathan never had much interest in cars, but guessed that both were made sometime in the thirties.

A young man was getting out of one of the cars. Dressed in an old fashioned suit, the man had reddish

hair, grey eyes, and refined features. He looked to be a man who had worked little but had thought much, as worry lines had already been etched into his brow.

The man didn't seem to notice Nathan staring up the driveway at him. Instead, he turned, and walked into the open front door. Without really thinking about it, Nathan followed. Although part of him realized the audacity of simply walking in uninvited, he wanted to find out where he was.

Nathan stepped inside and walked down a narrow hallway. The parlor at his right was empty, but he heard voices at the end of the hall. He saw an open bedroom, and peered inside. The man was kneeling beside a bed where an old woman lay. Emaciated by age and disease, her face was wrinkled, her eyes were dim, and most of her teeth were gone. Yet, in spite of all that, Nathan

could tell that at one time she had been a very pretty girl.

A doctor with an old fashioned black bag stood on the other side of the bed. He had made a house call to this dying woman, but could do nothing for her.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Whately," the doctor told the young man. "But the cancer has spread too fast. You had better call in your priest while there's still time."

"Mother?" the man said, gently taking the woman's hand and looking into her face.

The woman's eyes slowly fluttered open, and she groaned in pain. "Morgan," she whispered. "Don't leave me."

"Everything will be all right," he said, although he sounded more like he was trying to convince himself.

"No," she protested. "I'm going to die. I know it." She began to cough, choking on her own drainage.

The doctor tried to prop her up and pound her back, but she continued to gasp for air. This served to throw her into a panic, and she grabbed Morgan's arm.

"Help me!" she cried between coughs. "Help me please! I don't want to die! I don't want to die!"

Morgan himself cried out, and tried to pull away, but the old woman held on with a strength born of terror and desperation. The doctor ran to his bag, pulled out a bottle of alcohol, and tried to force it down her throat. Nathan, a spectator, wondered why the doctor didn't give her a shot of some real medicine, rather than try to drug her this way.

He wondered again at his location. No longer believing himself to be going towards heaven, he instead began to wonder when he was. Somehow, inexplicably, he had the feeling that he had crossed over to a simpler time, when the technology he took for granted was mere

speculative fiction, and when medicine amounted to little more than supportive care.

The doctor finally force fed her enough liquid to weaken her grip. She fell backwards onto her pillow, moaning and muttering. Her son gripped his chest, and fought back tears while gasping for breath.

Nathan's view faded then, and for a time, he knew nothing. Then, he was aware of lying on a soft bed. As his vision cleared, he saw an IV line connecting him to a bag of fluid and pain medicine. His side was aching again, but now the ache felt like a dull weight instead of a sharp knife. As his eyes adjusted to the lower light, he saw that he was in a hospital room. Apparently, the past vision had only been a dream.

Nathan wondered why he would dream something like that, of all things. While he enjoyed history, he

tended to prefer ancient to modern, thanks to his late father-in-law being a teacher of it. They had had many long enjoyable conversations while he had been alive, and he knew far more than most lay people as a result.

Nor did he have the fear of death that the dream figure had. His life had given him ample proof that death only opened another chapter in existence. His faith, moreover, helped assure him that he would pass into salvation, rather than damnation. So, he merely accepted whatever happened to him, and did the best he could.

Consequently, he found himself bewildered by a dream that seemed to have nothing to do with him. As he thought about it, he heard voices conversing outside his door.

"Nathaniel Hawthorne Paxton, fifty five year old male, birth date 4/5/73", a voice called, sounding like it

was reading a chart. "Brought here last night with multiple rib fractures and a considerable loss of blood..."

He heard footsteps as another person approached the nurse's station. "Doctor, is he in there?" a second female voice asked. Nathan slowly recognized the voices as belonging to his physician, Dr. Stephens, and his sister, Helen Ferris.

He smiled slowly, wistfully, at the mention of his full name. He had been named for the writer because his grandfather had been fond of Hawthorne's stories. He had called them imaginative without being too 'fantastic.' How little his grandfather knew that Nathan's life would follow the pattern of fantastic.

"Yes, Helen," Dr. Stephens replied. "He came in last night."

"What happened to him?" Helen asked.

"We don't know," the doctor said. "He just drove in after being injured somehow."

"Can I see him?"

"I don't see why not. But I don't know if he's awake."

The door opened and the two women stepped in. His sister Helen looked like a female version of himself, but had kept herself better groomed. Dr. Stephens, by contrast, had lighter, curlier hair and a stockier build.

The doctor smiled in pleasant surprise when she saw him alert. "Well. Hi, Nathan. Feeling better?"

"Nathan, what happened?" Helen repeated.

"I was in a wreck," he remembered.

"But I saw your truck outside," Helen protested. "They moved it to the guest parking lot. It's fine."

"I was in another vehicle," Nathan said. "It's complicated."

"How is your pain?" the doctor asked.

Nathan shrugged. "I feel more weak than anything. My head feels like it’s drifting in and out of being awake."

"Do you know where you are?"

"Sure. I'm at...Whately," Nathan said. He trailed off as he thought about the name. The person in his dream had the same name.

"Nathan, are you all right?" Helen asked, frowning in concern.

"Yeah, I guess so," he replied.

"Well, I can let you visit a little more," Dr. Stephens said. She raised an eyebrow. "Do you want to tell me more about this accident?"

"No, not really." Nathan said it without any actual rudeness, and in such a deadpan tone that the doctor smiled.

"Always the man of mystery," she said with a shake of her head. "We'll talk later."

She left, and Helen sat in a chair by his bed.

"She has no idea," Nathan commented.

Helen looked at him, and took his hand. "What did happen to you? Please tell me."

So, Nathan did. He told the entire story and watched his sister go from disbelief to dismay.

"It was an offshoot of Inana's cult," Nathan said, finishing. "That was how she found Elaine and her parents. I never knew until now. But it’s gone now. Another part of her legacy snuffed out."

"I hope so, Nathan," she said, looking worried again. "How many more are there, I wonder?"

"I don't know. Maybe, though…maybe I'm supposed to finish the Beaumont’s work. Since I married into the

family and the others are dead, I guess that makes me their last heir."

Helen bit her lip. "I wish you hadn't come here to Whately, though. You don't read the papers, but the hospital has had trouble staying accredited for years."

"Why?"

"The death rate of patients is significantly higher than the national average," Helen told him. "They've faced several lawsuits, and are in financial trouble. But the strangest thing is that no one seems to know why. The protocols have been looked over, health inspectors have examined the building, and staff has been retrained over and over. Nothing here should be any better or worse than anywhere else, yet nearly a third of patients either die or get so sick they have to be flown to Louisville, or somewhere else."

"Hey," Nathan said gently. He squeezed her hand. "I'm not going anywhere. Don't think like that."

She shook her head. "I hope not."

They sat in silence for several minutes, thinking on the past and the future.

II

"I'm sorry, my son," the priest told Morgan Whately. They were in his mother's room, standing before a bed that now held a body covered by a sheet. The priest had come to deliver the last rites, and was now attempting to comfort the young man.

Morgan looked up, his eyes red from tears. "The suffering," he said, his voice hoarse. "Why couldn't she just die in her sleep or something like that? Why the suffering?"

The priest shook his head sadly. "It is the price of living in a fallen world, my son. Do you remember the story of Job? God allowed the devil to test his faith by taking everything from him. His friends told him that either God was punishing him, or that he had brought it on himself. But those are only two reasons why evil happens. Other times, the devil inflicts sorrow, or we feel the effects of the world in general."

"How is that supposed to comfort me, father?" Morgan asked bitterly.

"By remembering how the story ends," the priest replied. "Job's trials, like ours, are allowed so that our faith is tested and tempered. We learn to rely solely on God, we reach out to him, and we are restored, as Job was."

"God doesn't raise the dead. At least, not usually."

"If not in this life, then in the next."

Morgan shook his head. "How can I know that?"

"By faith, Morgan," the priest said.

"But how?" he insisted. "Why don't more of us receive signs? There were prophets, saints like Francis of Assisi and Teresa of Avila who had visions. Even in recent years, there was the case of Brother Diego, as reported by Father Vincent Alighieri."

"Yes, I met Father Vincent when he spoke at our archdiocese," the priest said. "He was a good, wise man. But he also said that those who receive signs are chosen by God for a reason. It isn't something you can seek out yourself, and if you do, you may well fall into the occult. Any spirits you would see that way would lead you into hell." He shook his head. "No, Morgan, you must simply believe what has been revealed to the church."

Morgan's face had such a look of doubt and despair that both men remained silent for a time. But the priest, feeling uncomfortable, decided to change the subject.

"Now, as to your mother's funeral..."

Morgan's head snapped up. "No. No funeral. Just have her buried in the cemetery here, on her property."

"No funeral?" the priest echoed. "My son, surely you would not deny your mother..."

"What?" Morgan interrupted, fighting back tears. "Deny her what? Having her body paraded around for two days? To have to sit through both a showing and a service where people bother me with flowers and platitudes?"

As he spoke, Morgan grew more and more agitated. "They mean well, I know. But they can do nothing. Father, the way we deal with death is cruel. We don't allow mourners to be alone with their grief. We force

them to go public whether they like it or not, and we tell them they're wrong if they don't want to."

"They need closure too, my son," the priest said gently.

"I don't care! I said no funeral." Morgan scowled darkly at him. "This conversation is over. Get out."

The priest's jaw dropped in surprised anger; he wasn't used to being spoken to in that manner.

"You heard me. Get out of here," Morgan repeated, more firmly.

The priest's expression wavered between an insulted and sympathetic look. "We'll talk later, my son. I'll pray for you."

After making the sign of the cross, he left. Morgan looked over at the nightstand, and saw a glass. Picking it up, he hurled it at the door, shattering it. Then he threw himself on the sheet covered corpse, and began sobbing.

She had been his only family. Now he was alone.

Completely alone.

A soft knock at the door stirred Nathan out of sleep. He blinked crust out of his eyes, and realized that he had been dreaming. A nurse entered his room.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Paxton," she said. "Did I wake you up?"

"Don't worry about it," Nathan replied.

"I just need to get your vitals," she said, reaching over to take his blood pressure. Nathan noted with some dismay that it was lower than normal, perhaps relating to the fluid loss. He couldn't be sure, however. He felt like he was drifting, wavering between here and…where? What was he seeing in his dreams? Why did the man have the same name as the hospital?

"Can I get you anything?" the nurse asked.

He looked at her and tried to focus. "Do you know where the name to this hospital comes from?"

"Whately?" the nurse frowned. "I think it's because someone donated money to the hospital, or something like that. We've been around for nearly a century. I think there's more on it in our brochures downstairs."

"Would you get me one?" Nathan asked.

"If you like. Getting stir crazy?" she asked drily.

"Something like that."

"Why don't you watch some TV?"

Nathan made a face. "No thanks." He hated reality shows and crime dramas.

"All right," she shrugged. She left and returned a few minutes later. Nathan nodded his thanks, and began to peruse the offered brochure.

He read that the hospital had been founded in the late 1920's as Oakwood Hospital, but a decade later had

changed its name to Whately after a large donation from Morgan Whately. Nathan sat straight up in bed. The connection to this place and his dreams all of a sudden made sense. But why he dreamed about the connection remained a mystery.

"Mr. Paxton, are you all right?" the nurse asked, having never left.

Nathan looked up and tried to stay calm. He didn't want them to think he had cracked under the stress of injury. Nor did he want to explain himself until he knew more.

"Yes, I'm fine," Nathan said. "If you don't mind, I'd like to take my dinner a little later."

"Are you hurting? Do you need more morphine?"

"No, that won't be necessary. Thank you, nurse."

She left and Nathan returned to the brochure.

It contained a mini biography. Morgan Whately was born in 1902 to Jeremiah Whately and the former Agnes

Morgan, a wealthy socialite from New Albany. Noted for her beauty and fortune, Ms. Morgan was the only daughter of a businessman who had been partners with the wealthy Culbertson family. But rather than marry into more money, she married a farmer from Rodman, and left luxury behind her. When she died of cancer in 1937, her only son became the last heir to the Morgan fortune.

Morgan had donated considerable money to the hospital, and served as its administrator until the early seventies when he disappeared. One day, he closed his bank account, and didn't show up for work. When the police investigated, they found that the fortune had been removed from the bank by a check out to 'cash'. No one ever heard of Whately again.

The article then went on to discuss the next several administrators who had served, and ended with a

statement expressing the hospital's commitment to excellence. Naturally, no mention was made of the faltering success rates. Nathan leaned back in his bed, deep in thought. He didn't know what it all meant, but somehow felt nervous. As if he was on the verge of something that shouldn't be disturbed.

III

"Dr. Thorne, I wonder if you could have a look at one of my patients," Dr. Stephens said.

The man she addressed was seated across the table from her as the two ate lunch in the hospital's small cafeteria. Dr. Thorne was a tall man with thinning grey hair, thick glasses and a grandfatherly disposition. Dr. Stephens liked him despite occasional differences of opinion concerning prescribing habits.

"Certainly, Dr. Stephens," he replied. "I'm finished with my rounds upstairs. Who did you have in mind?"

"His name is Nathan Paxton," she replied. "He's a trauma patient that's been here a few days. I've been his doctor for years."

"Go on."

"The unit nurse has been concerned about his behavior. She called me in to talk to him this morning, and he was very taciturn. Nathan's not an extroverted person by nature, but this was an unusual level even for him. He barely speaks to the nurses or his sister, doesn't watch anything, and only reads the hospital brochure. He acts like something major is weighing on his mind, but won't tell anyone what."

"Does he have a history of depression or anxiety?" Dr. Thorne asked.

"He was married over twenty years ago. She died, and he didn't take it well." Dr. Stephens thought for a few minutes. "You know, it's really funny. His last stay

here was about two years after his wife's death. He had a badly broken leg. After that, though, his depression went away."

"Perhaps not," Dr. Thorne said thoughtfully. "Most people do have underlying depression or anxiety, I believe. It just takes a major life circumstance, like an injury, to make it noticeable to others."

Dr. Stephens smiled wryly. "We've discussed that before."

"Yes; you think I just see psychosis in everyone who isn't bubbly by nature," Dr. Thorne smiled back. "I don't really, but do think such disorders go under diagnosed. I do wish it were otherwise."

They finished their lunches, took their trays to the drop off, and left the cafeteria. Stepping out, they found themselves in the hospital basement. The pharmacy was across the hall, and the right end of the hall led to the

stairs and elevators. The left was a corridor that led to some little used storage rooms.

"I can see Mr. Paxton now, if you don't mind," Dr. Thorne offered.

"Thank you," Dr. Stephens replied. As they passed the left corridor, she paused. A sudden chill overtook her, and she had a feeling of dread. She stopped, and nervously looked down. The hall contained several more feet and turned off to the right, so she couldn't see where it ended. Dr. Stephens couldn't quite put her finger on it, but she somehow felt afraid of that corridor. The only one she had ever asked was the pharmacist. He had denied ever seeing or hearing anything, but acted uneasy himself.

"Is something wrong?" Dr. Thorne asked, interrupting her thoughts.

She looked back at him. "Just felt a chill, that's all," she said quickly. "Must be something wrong with the ventilation."

"I don't feel anything," Dr. Thorne shrugged.

"I don't either now," she confessed. "Oh well. Let's go see Nathan. I'm worried that he's somehow losing touch with reality."

Nathan walked down the dirt path once more to the Whately house. The sun wasn't shining today, and a cool breeze whisked past him. He still felt a sense of foreboding, as if he was on a dark path that led to destinations unknown. However, as he walked he became dimly aware that he was being led. Something, or someone, wanted him to witness these events.

Nathan felt frustration at being moved, almost like a pawn in someone else's game. Especially since he was

supposed to be recovering quietly in his hospital bed. It seemed that he had survived one ordeal only to begin another.

Yet, there was a sense of something familiar about all of this. He had the feeling that this unseen presence, just outside of his perception, not only knew him, but wasn't his enemy. So, he didn't refuse to go along with the vision, assuming that he had any real choice anyway.

He arrived at Whately's small, squarish house and walked up to the door. Turning the knob, he discovered that the door was locked. He walked around to the side, and peered into the window. The deathbed of Ms. Whately was visible, but now empty and neatly made. Nathan rapped lightly on the window, but no one answered.

Walking around to the back of the house, Nathan looked out on a fairly large valley. A cornfield covered

much of this, but beyond Nathan could see a small cemetery by a paved road. In the distance, he thought he could see two people by one of the graves, so he decided to walk down there.

He slowly made his way through the corn stalks, and to the cemetery entrance. It had no official name; just one of the many community plots that had stood for decades alone, away from all eyes. Nathan walked to the middle grave, belonging to someone named William Hanover, and turned to his right.

Morgan Whately and his priest stood over a grave with the marker carved in the shape of an angel with its head bowed in sorrowful prayer. No one else was present; apparently Morgan had won that argument after all. The priest read from his prayer book while Whately stood, his eyes still red from crying. But now,

he shed no more tears, and just grimly looked on until the service was finished.

The priest shut his book, and walked over to Whately. Nathan couldn't hear what they were saying, but the priest finally shook his head, and walked to the road where his car waited. He then drove off, leaving the younger man alone.

"The horror of death," Whately said to himself. "The horror. Not even faith protects you from it. Will anything? If only…"

Dr. Thorne and Stephens were walking towards the ICU when they heard a nurse paging for her overhead. They looked at each other, and quickened their pace. The nurse at the station ran over to them.

“Doctor, Mr. Paxton is thrashing on his bed!” she cried, alarm in her face. “Nancy is trying to hold him, but…”

“Get IV phenytoin and lorazepam out of the emergency kit!” she said. “Hurry!”

“Does have a history of epilepsy too?” Dr. Thorne asked.

“No; he wasn’t on meds for anything when he came in,” Dr. Stephens replied.

They ran into his room where the other nurse tried in vain to grab a violently convulsing patient. His hands were balled into fists, and the doctor noticed that one hand had a piece of crumpled paper, and the other gripped a pen. He thrashed and thrashed, but his face appeared strangely calm.

The first nurse came in with a shot just as the fit seemed to subside. The tremors decreased in intensity, and ebbed away before their very eyes. The nurse stepped forward, but Dr. Stephens motioned her back, waiting to see what happened.

Nathan's hands relaxed and he dropped the pen and paper. His eyelids fluttered, and he looked over at the medical staff in confusion. The nurse picked up the piece of paper as the doctor stepped forward.

"Nathan? Can you hear me?"

"Hmm?" Nathan said, not fully awake. He blinked a few times. "What's going on?"

"You were having a fit," Dr. Stephens told him. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw the nurse unfolding the crumpled paper.

“I was?” Nathan answered. He frowned and shook his head. “I was dreaming…”

The nurse yelped and quickly passed the paper to Dr. Thorne. “Hideous!” she said.

Dr. Thorne jumped himself when he saw the paper. “When did you draw this?” he asked, nervously.

“What?” Nathan was really confused now. “Doctor, I can’t draw. I’ve never had any artistic ability.”

“You don’t remember doing this?” he asked, turning the rumpled paper to show Nathan.

An illustration of a man greeted his sight. It depicted a wizened old man with a wrinkled face contorted in pain. But what made it really disturbing was that it had no shirt, so one could see the chest. Where the heart normally was, a third arm had burst from the chest. Blood dribbled down the drawing’s

chest, and the hand seemed to be desperately grasping at air. Underneath the drawing was written the phrase:

‘The devil continues to walk the earth. Growing older and older.’

Nathan shook his head. “Doctor, I didn’t draw that. I’ve never seen it until now.”

But the more he looked at the disgusting picture, the more he realized that wasn’t entirely true. The figure’s face looked like an older version of Morgan Whately.

IV

“Ms. Ferris? I’m Dr. Throne. Thank you for coming.”

Helen shook hands with the psychiatrist who greeted her at the waiting room. She had been told via phone about the incident in Nathan's room.

"Do you feel that Nathan needs therapy?" she asked. "I don't mean to be rude, but he always seemed so strong. Even when he was depressed."

"Dr. Stephens is worried about him," he said, trying to be as gentle as he could. "I don't wish to frighten you, but he had an episode yesterday where he went into… almost like a trance."

Helen bit her lip, worried despite the doctor's soothing tone.

"I find that I tend to have better results with my patients whenever it's feasible to include another family member," Dr. Thorne continued. "People need each other for support, especially in times of trouble. I

understand that Nathan and you don’t have a lot of family.”

“Just the two of us and my son,” Helen said. “Apart from that, there’s nobody left beyond a few cousins and in-laws.”

“Your husband?”

“He’s dead too,” Helen sighed.

“I’m sorry. Well, shall we begin?”

They went to Nathan’s room, where the mover began to tell them of his vision. Helen listened as Nathan spoke about his sudden strange connection with a man from the past they had never heard of before. Helen saw the bizarre illustration and confirmed that Nathan wouldn’t be able to draw anything even remotely like it.

“A very strange thing, to be sure,” Dr. Thorne said, thoughtfully. “Tell me more about yourself, Nathan. Have you ever, at any time, had an experience like this before?”

“It seems like strangeness has been a part of my life for a long time,” Nathan said. He sounded so weary, that Helen’s heart went out to him.

“It’s harder and harder to remember what life was like before,” Nathan continued.

“How do you mean?” Dr. Thorne asked.

“Where do you want me to start?”

“Maybe you can begin at the point where your ‘strangeness’ began?”

“You remember the epidemic? When nearly everyone in town lost someone?”

“Yes,” Dr. Thorne nodded, taking some notes.

“My parents, my wife…”

“You have dealt with a lot of death for someone relatively young,” Dr. Thorne said.

“It’s the price I’ve paid for life,” Nathan answered. “Besides, I haven’t been young for some time.”

“Did you ever seek help for all the grief?”

“Only from God, in prayer,” Nathan said. “And occasionally from Dr. Fowler, a minister I had once.”

“I remember him. We were friends, along with some of the faculty at Oakwood University,” Dr. Thorne told him. “But Dr. Fowler himself said that grief and faith don’t contradict each other. Perhaps you could benefit from some therapy, perhaps medication.”

Nathan shook his head. “I came to grips with Elaine years ago.”

“Are you sure?” Thorne asked, raising his eyebrows.

“Doctor, medication isn’t going to help me,” Nathan insisted, politely but firmly. “I don’t know why I’m seeing these visions of Whately, but I don’t think old grief is it. I don’t think you can help me.”

“I would like to try,” Thorne said gently. “Won’t you let me? Couldn’t we at least talk some more tomorrow?”

“If you want,” Nathan said, resigned. He never cared for psychiatrists, although Dr. Thorne wasn’t as bad as some he had heard of.

Dr. Thorne nodded, and motioned for Helen to follow him out the door.

“Well, what do you think?” Helen asked him.

“I’m not sure yet,” Thorne said. “I have my theories, but I’ll need to talk to him some more.”

V

In the middle of the afternoon, Nathan stirred from a long nap. He yawned, stretched, and discovered that he felt better than he had in some time. Looking down, he noticed that his ribs had healed again. He banged his hand on the counter, and the lack of feeling confirmed that he was dreaming once more.

Standing up, he walked out of his room, aimless, but determined to find where he was supposed to go. Several nurses were gathered around their station, but didn’t respond to Nathan’s calling out. Oddly enough, their uniforms and hairstyles looked like they were from the early seventies. Was this vision taking place at a later time than the previous ones? He would have to keep walking to find out.

Nathan walked to the stairs. He felt a little hungry, so he decided to go to the cafeteria. He went to the hospital basement, and saw it opposite the pharmacy. As he headed for the door, he got a chilled feeling. Turning down the hall, he felt a sense of foreboding there. As if there was, or soon would be, something unspeakable.

Nathan frowned. Would be? That seemed a rather strange thought, and not entirely his own. Hesitantly, he took a step forward, but found that his foot instead stepped in the direction of the cafeteria. Whatever was at the end of the hall would not be found just yet. So, Nathan stood in the door of the small cafeteria.

Two men, one old and one young, sat at a table across from each other. Nathan looked closely, and saw that he recognized them both. One was Morgan Whately, now an older man. His hair had turned white, and his face was lined with more wrinkles and worry

lines. Nathan saw no joy in his eyes, no sign that he had ever found contentment after his mother's death.

The other man, Nathan noted, was none other than Dr. Fowler, albeit younger than when Nathan had known him. The two had begun to converse about their relative positions in the hospital. The only other person in the dining room was a black man dressed in surgical scrubs.

"So, I understand you are the new chaplain?" Whately asked.

"My name is Donald Fowler," the younger man answered. "I'm working on my thesis for the seminary on Oakwood University's campus. After that, I'm hoping to start a church here."

"You're not from around here, are you?" Whately asked. "Your accent sounds like New England."

“Yes, my family just moved here from the east coast,” Fowler nodded. “I think we’ll like it here. It’s a very pleasant area, and not too close to the big cities.” He raised his eyebrows. “Have you lived here long?”

“My whole life,” Whately said. “Is this a temporary job, then? Before you finish school?”

“That’s right.”

Whately shook his head. “It won’t be easy to be a chaplain in a hospital, Don. You will see a lot of anguish, and a lot of people asking you hard questions.”

He looked at Fowler. “Tell me, what will you tell someone in the face of death?”

Fowler shifted in his seat. While Whately’s tone wasn’t exactly belligerent, there was definitely a challenge there. “Well sir,” he began. “I would try to remind them that while God doesn’t promise a painless

life, he does promise never to leave you nor forsake you."

"Would you say then, that death is really a good thing?" Whately asked. "I've heard people try to argue that on the grounds that you are with God."

He shook his head. "I don't believe them. No matter what they say, death is a horror. No amount of philosophy or theology can change that, and anyone who argues otherwise is kidding himself."

"I'm sorry," Fowler answered.

Whately looked up. "For what?" he asked, frowning.

"You've been hurt. You've had to, to say something like that."

Whately looked down. "My mother died many years ago," he said quietly, remembering. "She had cancer,

and lingered for months in pain and fear. It took everything from her, her joy, her faith, and finally her very sanity."

He sighed, and looked up at the young intern. "I lost my faith during that time. I never got it back."

"You don't believe in God," Fowler said.

"I believe he exists," Whately said. "But since my loss, I've had no interest in serving him. He gave me no comfort or help."

Fowler pursed his lips. "In a sense, you're right," he said. "Death is a horror. So is sin. It is such a horror that God himself had to die for sin."

He looked at him with compassion. "He doesn't sit back and do nothing. He died for us. He's there still. We must have faith in death, just as we do in life. That is our purpose, and our challenge."

Whately stood. “I’m sorry Fowler,” he said. “But when I think of doing that, I only see my mother.”

Whately walked out of the cafeteria, past Nathan, apparently unaware of him. Fowler sighed, and kept eating. The doctor, however, stood and followed Whately out into the hall.

“Excuse me, Mr. Whately,” the doctor called out. Whately turned, and waited for the man to catch up.

“Yes?” he asked.

The doctor put out his hand and smiled politely. “I am Dr. Curwen Lagoda. I don’t usually round at this hospital, but was visiting one of my patients here. I care for all the people in my hometown.”

Whately shook his hand. “What can I do for you, doctor?”

“You’ll forgive me, but I couldn’t help overhearing your conversation with the young minister.”

Whately looked at him warily. “Look, I don’t try to convert anyone to how I feel,” he warned. “All I ask is the same in return.”

“Oh, but you don’t understand,” Lagoda smiled. There was something just slightly chilling underneath the friendly gesture. “I agree with you. I’d like to help you, if I can.”

“I don’t think you can help me, sir,” Whately answered. “You’d have to raise the dead.”

Lagoda chuckled and reached into his pocket. Jotting down a quick note, he handed it to the old man. “These are directions to my home, Mr. Whately. My patient is in ICU right now. If you would, have a look at

his chart when it's convenient. Then, I would very much like for you to have dinner at my home next week."

"What are you talking about?" Whately asked, bewildered.

"Just see my patient. I will answer your questions a week from now."

Lagoda nodded, and walked up the stairs without another word. Nathan's vision blurred then, and he grabbed the doorway to steady himself. When his vision cleared once more, he found himself in bed, gripping the railing. His latest dream, and the latest revelation of Morgan Whately, was at an end.

"Now your vision, as you call it, has an element that is familiar to you," Dr. Thorne said. "Your minister."

“I didn’t know he had been a chaplain here,” Nathan answered. Per Dr. Thorne’s instructions, he had faithfully repeated his dreams even though Nathan knew the doctor considered them delusions. He had continued to try and force medication on Nathan, but had had difficulty as the man was in his right mind.

“But surely he mentioned it at least once in his sermons,” Thorne replied. “You couldn’t possibly remember everything that he would’ve said over the years.”

Nathan eyed him warily. “You seem to believe this part.”

“Nathan, I’ve no doubt that parts of what you’re saying are true,” Thorne said. “I can see Dr. Fowler doing mission work here. You really did lose your wife. There really was a Morgan Whately who lost his mother.”

“But I honestly didn’t know that, until a few days ago,” Nathan insisted.

“I believe you didn’t consciously know,” Thorne said. “But you probably did read something one of the other times you were here, only to forget it. You would have had a lot more on your mind at the time.”

“Granting the possibility, why would I start dreaming about Whately and Fowler?”

Dr. Thorne folded his hands in front of his face. For a minute, he studied his fingernails, as he tried to find the best way of telling his theory. He knew that his patient would deny any illness no matter what he said.

“Nathan…I feel that you are having dreams involving both death and coming to grips with death because you yourself are facing death.”

He frowned, and glanced over at the machine reading Nathan's vital signs. "For some reason, you aren't healing. Your ribs are still broken, and you're still in pain. Naturally, you must think of your own death and loss. Naturally you would dream."

"I don't think so, doctor. Besides, if all that was wrong with me was a fear of dying, why would I be seeing the past?"

"The mind plays all kind of bizarre tricks," Thorne said dismissively.

Nathan thought for a moment. He grudgingly admitted to himself that he could understand the doctor's point of view. He supposed that, were the roles reversed, he'd probably say something very similar. Nevertheless, he knew he wasn't simply losing his mind. The visions were real, and they were definitely trying to tell him something about Mr. Whately.

“There is one thing, doctor,” Nathan said. “When I was in the basement in my dream, I saw this hallway by the cafeteria. Tell me, is there such a hall downstairs?”

“Yes. Past the pharmacy, there are some storage rooms,” Thorne nodded.

“I got a strange feeling that there’s something down the hall,” Nathan said. “Something I both should and shouldn’t see. What do you think that could be?”

“Perhaps that is your fear,” Thorne said. “The fear that drives you to draw devils and dream about death. We will continue to explore your visions together. Trust me, Nathan. We will soon learn the truth.”

VI

Whately drove his car out into the country. Passing fields of corn and untouched woodland, he soon passed by a green town marker that read Lagoda. He found

himself mildly surprised that the doctor's home town bore his name, but supposed that the doctor's family was prominent here.

On the other hand, as he drove down the town's shabby main drag, he doubted anyone else prominent lived here. Lagoda appeared to be one of those small villages that one drove through in a matter of minutes; it was so small that Whately didn't encounter a single traffic light before turning down another road.

Whately drove past some run down houses that didn't seem inhabited before the road took him back to the country. The road seemed to shrink, and the trees crowded either side as he drove further and further down the road. The sunlight seemed crowded out by the trees, and he felt a chill. He turned on his car heater, but still couldn't get warm. A sense of unwelcome subtly entered his mind, and he briefly wondered whether he

should've tried to visit the doctor after all. The man gave him an odd feeling, like he was pretending to be something he wasn't. Perhaps what he really was shouldn't be discovered.

Yet, the odd nature of his patient caused curiosity and long forgotten hope to override uneasiness. Whately had indeed reviewed the chart on Lagoda's patient, only to discover something strange. The man had been brought to the hospital suffering great abdominal pain. In fact, he had died the following day.

However, despite being clearly pronounced dead, Dr. Lagoda had gone in to examine him. Just moments after leaving the room, the patient revived. He had only spent a few more days in the hospital, and then discharged home. The medical staff had called it a miracle.

Dr. Lagoda had flatly refused any press coverage of the extraordinary event. Indeed, he simply attributed it to prayer, and then paid the medical staff on duty to keep the matter quiet. Not a hard task, given the doctor's commanding presence.

Whately wondered what it all meant. Did the doctor possess hidden knowledge over life and death? Since his mother's funeral, he had hoped against hope that he could find, if not a way to avoid death, then at least assurance of his soul's final destination. Most of the people he had known found that through church, but he wanted proof he could see. If the doctor knew anything, then he hoped that he would we willing to share his knowledge.

He drove into a clearing, and was greeted by a beautiful mansion, standing by itself. Whately parked in

front of the garage, turned off the engine, and walked to the front door.

Seeing no bell, he knocked loudly, hoping to be heard. Behind the door, he heard curious shuffling sounds and felt a bit of a chill once more. The handle then turned, and he found himself tensing.

The door opened, revealing a younger black woman. Very pretty and considerably younger than Lagoda, she was dressed in an elegant pink dress. Peering out behind her was a little boy in a dapper suit.

"What do you want?" the woman asked. Whately thought he caught a glint of fear in her eyes, but it passed as soon as it came. Before he could reply however, Lagoda's voice sounded from inside.

"It's all right, Zenobia. I've been waiting for Mr. Whately."

Dr. Lagoda stepped behind Zenobia and opened the door. "Please come in, sir," he told Whately with a smile.

Whately complied and walked into the spacious, well lit parlor. Dr. Lagoda came forward to shake the older man's hand. "Welcome to my home." He pointed to the woman and child. "This is Zenobia. And this is our son, Marcel. Say hello to Mr. Whately, Marcel."

Children, however, never perform on cue, so Marcel only stared wide eyed at the guest. Lagoda laughed, and motioned for Whately to follow him down the hall. Despite the cordial atmosphere, however, Whately felt uneasy. The doors on either side of the hall were closed, but he thought he heard faint sounds behind them. Ahead, he heard the clatter of dishes and moving chairs.

"What's that?" Whately asked. Again, Zenobia looked uneasy, but Lagoda showed no signs of anything being amiss.

“My servants,” he answered. “They are preparing our dinner. Come.”

They faced a large double door, which the doctor opened and motioned for them to enter. Whately saw the table spread out before them, with central trays piled high with turkey, green beans, and other sides. The servants, however, had quickly departed before they had entered and while Whately still heard noises in the distance, he never saw them.

They all sat down and Lagoda bowed his head for prayer. Whately hadn’t prayed in years, but bowed his head anyway. For the doctor seemed to know what he was doing, and had apparently performed a miracle once before. Perhaps he could finally answer his long standing questions about death and the afterlife.

However, the doctor offered up no Christian prayer. Nor did he even speak English. Rather he spoke sounds

that had no meaning to Whately, being uttered in a language that he never heard. Whately's heart beat faster, and his breath became shallow as he felt a passing sensation of being crushed. But it left as soon as it came, so Whately didn't mention it to his host.

"So Mr. Whately," Ladoga began as he took a piece of the already carved turkey. "Did you see my patient?"

"I didn't see him before he returned here," Whately said. "But I read his chart. I'm amazed that you keep it out of the papers."

"I save such things for my people here," the doctor replied. "My family has lived in this town since my ancestors settled here, over a century ago."

"I saw the town name," Whately said.

"Yes. My ancestor led the first settlers here. He had been brought to this country as a slave. But he too

had a miracle. He managed to stay free, and help others do the same. They all came here, and I wish to continue his work."

"Is the patient's recovery truly a miracle, then?" Whately asked hopefully as he began to eat.

"Oh yes. Miracles do happen, Mr. Whately."

"But you never know when or where they do," Whately said. "I prayed for a miracle with my mother while she was dying. God denied me."

"Well sir, the mistake most people make is believing that miracles come only from God," Lagoda offered.

Whately raised his eyebrows. He hadn't expected an answer like that. "But God is the creator," he replied.

Lagoda shrugged. "Maybe, maybe not. That's a matter of faith, isn't it? There are multiple spirits beyond the physical world, Mr. Whately. All are older

than our world. I've no doubt one of them created the others, but who knows which one? At any rate, I've learned that many can produce miracles. One of these spirits had watched over my family since the original Lagoda was captured by slavers in Africa."

"Who?"

"He calls himself Nergal. His main body of followers are to the east, led by a necromancer She heals and protects better than any 'creator' ever did for me, and in return, I give her loyalty. That is essentially how the physical and the spiritual interact, is it not?"

"But…is she good?" Whately asked. For something about it sounded too good to be true. Here lay the comfort he had so long sought. But after losing his faith, he found it hard to put faith in another.

“You see the results for yourself,” Lagoda said. “Tell me, Mr. Whately, would you like to know more?”

“Yes. Yes I would,” Whately decided. In spite of the misgivings, he did indeed want to know.

“How much is it worth to you?” Lagoda asked. “How much do you have?”

“What do you mean?” Whately asked, frowning.

“I will give you the knowledge you seek. The knowledge to escape from death.” Lagoda looked at him, and his eyes burned with an unreadable fire that caused Zenobia to bite her lip in fear. “But you must give something to get something. The price will be all your liquid assets.”

“What?!”

“Well, you can’t take with you, Mr. Whately,” Lagoda said. He didn’t smile despite the levity that usually

accompanied those words. "Perhaps you need further proof? You will recall the patient in the room down the hall from mine."

"The one with sepsis?" Whately asked.

"Yes. He will die tomorrow at noon," Lagoda told him. "The attending physician will pronounce him dead, so there will be no doubt. But exactly twenty minutes later, he will revive."

Lagoda ate for a few moments, and allowed his guest to ponder everything. He didn't know what to think. First the doctor claimed the ability to make miracles. Now he had crossed over to prophecy.

"When you see the sign, go and close your bank account, and make the check to cash. Then return here next Friday night. You may decide then whether what I give you is worth the money."

Lagoda stood up, and Whately sensed that the dinner was over. Lagoda took him to the door, shook his hand, and sent him on his way. Whately drove away, before he saw the smile on Lagoda's face. He began to chuckle, while Zenobia cowered behind him.

VII

Whately pulled up to Lagoda's home a week later. Sure enough, everything the doctor said came to pass. So, despite his fear, he had followed Lagoda's instructions and liquidated his bank account. He frowned at how quickly he had complied. What did he really know about the doctor, after all? What was the real source of his seemingly miraculous power?

He still felt nervous as he stepped up to the door. For somehow, it all felt unclean, as though whatever lurked inside Lagoda's house was inherently opposed to both God and the natural world. But he found that he

couldn't stop himself. He had somehow fallen under Lagoda's spell

Whately knocked on the door. No, that wasn't right. He wasn't being pulled; he wanted to be pulled. It was the same obsession with death and the same unwillingness to find solace in conventional means. Whatever transpired, he had chosen.

Lagoda answered the door. Dressed in a simple grey tunic, his manner seemed more grave than last time. Whately saw no trace of either Zenobia or Marcel.

"You've come," Lagoda said. "Good."

"You were right," Whately said. Everything you told me has come true so far."

"I keep my promises, Mr. Whately," he replied. "Do you have your money?"

"Yes."

“Don’t give it to me just yet.” Lagoda stepped aside, and motioned him in. “Come.”

They walked down the hall that connected the anterior to the rest of the house. Whately noted that instead of a chill, he felt heat, as though the furnace were running. Lagoda took him down a different hall from the one that led to the dining room. They found themselves facing other doors that led to a spacious ball room. Although dark, and illuminated only by candles on the walls and floor, Whately could see that it probably occupied a third of the mansion’s first floor. Tall windows lined the far wall, covered with curtains. The moon just barely peaked through one.

The ballroom contained no furniture. In the middle of the floor was a life size wooden statue. It was carved in the general shape of a woman and had a vague female face carved into its head.

“The necromancer gave my family spirits to command, Mr. Whately,” Lagoda explained. The chief one inhabits this idol. When I wish to speak with them, I command them here. They are the ones who can take life away, or give it back.

The statue was surrounded by a circle of candles. Lagoda stepped forward, knelt before it, and began to chant in the strange language. Whately stood still, not knowing what to do. Then he felt a warm rush of air behind him, and turned around.

The door had never been shut, and four men were walking in. They were dressed entirely in black, and their faces were hidden by white porcelain masks, as if they were Mardi Gras revelers. But their body language conveyed more threat than fun, and Whately’s fear jumped forward several notches.

“Who are they?” he asked, tensing.

Lagoda stopped his chanting or praying, and stood up to face him. The men stepped in, and the door shut behind them, although he couldn't tell by whom. They all approached Whately menacingly.

"They are my helpers, Mr. Whately," Lagoda answered. "All who live here in this town serve the necromancer, and I am their priest. These serve in a special way."

Whately coughed, being choked by phlegm that suddenly filled his lungs. Panicked by the sudden lack of air, he staggered for the door. None of the others present tried to stop him now.

"The spirits require the occasional sacrifice," Lagoda explained. "I think you will make a nice one. And through you, others as well."

Nathan shook out of his dream/vision, retching himself. He heard the nurses shouting down the hall, and supposed that he had given them another good scare. He looked around his hospital room, expecting to see either his sister, or Dr. Throne, but saw neither.

Instead, he saw none other than Dr. Fowler seated in the guest chair.

Nathan sat up quickly. He'd recognize the man anywhere, even though he had been dead for years. Indeed, the figure was slightly transparent, so Nathan realized that he was seeing a ghost. The realization brought him no fear, oddly enough. Only curiosity.

Nathan's dry heaves caused sharp pain to coarse through him. Still, no healing had come. Nothing Dr. Stephens had tried worked for him.

"Dr. Fowler?" Nathan asked. "But you're dead."

An ironic smile crept across the specter's face. "That usually happens when one stops living."

Nathan tried to reply, but began gagging once again. A nurse came in with a syringe of nausea medicine just as Dr. Fowler vanished. She administered the medication and Nathan's retching began to subside. Unfortunately, so did his consciousness.

VIII

"I'm sorry, Helen, but we had to sedate Nathan," Dr. Thorne said.

Helen, Thorne, and Dr. Stephens were all seated in a waiting lounge within the ICU. Nathan's condition had steadily worsened, and he had continued thrashing in his sleep. The two doctors had agreed to put the mover on

IV sedative and antipsychotic to at least help him rest and suppress his dreaming.

Dr. Throne frowned, and folded his hands in front of his face. “Nathan’s delusions have taken on a life all their own. I’ve never seen any other patient with such vivid hallucinations.”

“Do you still believe it’s only his old wounds?” Helen asked. “The more he tells us, the more it really does seem like the life of someone else.”

“But why?” Dr. Stephens wondered aloud. “Why the life on an old administrator? Why this crazy idea of a cult poisoning people?”

She looked at Helen. “Have you ever been to this Lagoda? I looked it up, and there is such a town. Could Nathan have brushed by something there? Something evil?”

“Doctor, surely you don’t believe in demons stalking people from the past and present?” Dr. Thorne chided.

“Why not?” Dr. Stephens replied. “There’s both a natural and supernatural world out there. They don’t contradict each other.”

“There is God and there are devils,” Helen agreed. “They do inflict harm when given the chance.”

“That is a theological issue, not a psychological one,” Dr. Thorne said. “For my part, I don’t know, and consider it impossible to know.”

“What do you believe in then?” Helen asked.

“I believe in keeping my mind open and looking for the simplest explanation that fits all facts. There has to be some answer without invoking evil spirits. I believe that Nathan’s Morgan Whately dream is really Nathan

facing some inner demon. He is Whately, while Lagoda and the ‘spirits’ are his fears…”

Helen rolled her eyes in frustration. She had had enough of the doctor’s well meaning, but patronizing approach to her brother. She had known him longer than Thorne had; she knew he wasn’t crazy. She wanted to do something, anything to help him through whatever was happening to him.

They had always been close, even as children. While they had quarreled, as all siblings did, Nathan had always been protective of her. Then when they became adults, and Nathan had been plagued by depression over Elaine, she had stood by him until he finally came to terms with it. Through the eventual deaths of all their other loved ones, they had stood together. Now, she felt that she had to find some evidence that these dreams were real.

“Are you rolling your eyes?” Dr. Thorne asked Helen, both surprised and irritated.

“Yes, I am!” she snapped. She stood quickly, causing the psychiatrist’s jaw to drop. “You know what I think? I think you don’t consider anything real unless you can perceive or understand it.” She blinked back tears of mingled worry and anger. “Well let me tell you something! The world isn’t that simple. Not everything can be explained away by Freud or driven away by medication.”

“Helen…” Dr. Stephens said, but Helen ignored her.

“There are things that won’t let you package them up in a neat little explanation. Something did happen to make Whately disappear. Something is happening to my brother now.”

She turned and stormed off. Dr. Thorne shook his head. He pitied her, for he felt she was in denial over her brother having a breakdown. Dr. Stephens chased after her.

“Helen, wait,” she called back. Helen was shaking with pent up anger, but did slow down enough to let her family physician catch up.

“I know, I lost my temper back there,” Helen said. A few tears did fall then, but she brushed them away, and her voice didn’t break. “But he’s my brother.”

“I know,” Dr. Stephens said gently. She gave the other woman a hug. “We’ll find the answer.”

Helen sighed. “The answer.” She looked up then, as though startled. “The answer. Maybe there is something I could find. Dr. Stephens, Morgan Whately was supposed to live in Rodman, right?”

“That’s right. Why?”

Helen began to head for the elevator. “I’m not sure. But maybe, if I can find his house, or his mother’s grave, I can then find proof that Nathan is seeing something real.”

That afternoon, Helen drove alone down a stretch of highway towards Rodman. She had looked up the town online, and printed directions to the town’s only cemetery. It involved a straightforward drive to the north side of the town, and then turning right onto a gravel road. Rodman was smaller than Oakwood, so few people actually lived and died there.

The sky was clear and the sun was out, so she found the road without any problems. Turning to the right, she drove towards a set of hills. The cemetery occupied one

side of the road, while a single small brick house stood on the left.

Helen pulled over, got out of the car, and walked to the cemetery entrance. A knee high stone wall formed the perimeter, and several dozen gravestones stood within. She noted that the grass was as neatly trimmed as the house's yard across the road. The rest of the valley was filled with weeds, and a small cornfield grew between the graveyard and the foot of the next hill.

Helen swallowed. It did indeed look like her brother's vision, although neither had been here before. Rodman was one of those places one went through, not to.

A light breeze began to blow, and a crow cawed ominously form the cornfield. Helen hugged herself, and watched the black bird take flight. It flew over the hills, and she saw an old, run down house atop the nearest

hill. Its exterior was weather-beaten, and hadn't been painted in decades. But the rear windows weren't boarded up, and the only barrier was a 'no trespassing' sign on the front yard. Its side wall faced her, and the front opened up to a dirt path that led further into the hills.

Seeing the house gave Helen a cold shiver. She knew she was looking at the same house where Morgan Whately had lived before his disappearance. It would have been about a thirty minute commute for him to reach the hospital, but he must not have minded.

It was in this house where his mother had died, along with his faith in God's goodness. She wondered what it would have been like to live without that. She and Nathan had both been racked with sorrow at the deaths of their respective spouses. They, however, had held on to God because they knew they would have no

other answer given. No, their faith had grown stronger with time and trials. What of Whately?

Helen walked up to the cemetery entrance. Entering the cemetery, she headed straight for the middle. If Nathan was right, that would be the easiest way to find what she was looking for. The grave stone in the middle had the name William Hanover. Slowly, she faced it, and turned to her right.

One grave stood apart from the more nondescript markers. It consisted of a crying baby angel statue with its head bowed in unanswered prayer. Helen took out her cell phone, and snapped a picture of the marker. Her pulse quickened as she realized that she now had proof of Nathan’s visions being a reality. She didn’t know whether to feel relief or unease since it confirmed something sinister.

Walking up to the grave, she read the name of Agnes Morgan Whately, born 1860, died 1937. Helen took another picture, and then looked up at the house. It would be easy enough to get there, and she wanted to document as much of the place as she could.

She cut through the cornfield to reach her destination as soon as she could. For, while sunny, the place gave her the creeps, and she decided not to linger any longer than she had to. But as she walked through the stalks, she heard a rustling behind her. Whirling around, she saw a few plants shaking, and couldn't tell whether it had been the wind or some animal. She looked for a moment, shrugged, and continued to walk.

Another rustling off to her side make her stop again.

"Hello?" she called out. "Someone there?"

No one answered, and she uncertainly began to move to the edge of the field. She did see some more rustling, however, and figured that it was either a dog or wild animal. Slowly, she reached down to pick up a stone for the ground. She threw it at the rustling and it stopped.

Helen left the cornfield, and began to climb the path to the abandoned house. She moved briskly, but tried to avoid any movement that would encourage pursuit, if it were the caretaker's dog. She kept looking over her shoulder, but saw no further movement in the field, so she hoped that she'd scared off whatever had been there.

The house was locked when she walked over to the door and knocked. Not that she'd really expected anything different. It looked like no one had entered since the police had investigated Whately's

disappearance nearly fifty years ago. She walked around to the side, which faced the field, and peered into the dusty window.

Although there was no way for to get in, Helen could see an old dingy bed with a dry-rotted mattress. Over the head board was the picture of a pretty young woman from the turn of the twentieth century. Smiling, she had her hand on the shoulder of a small boy who looked like a young version of Morgan. Helen took another picture with her phone.

She then heard the crunching sound of a footstep behind her. She turned around quickly to see another, completely different kind of boy. This one had sandy, disheveled hair, black eyes with virtually no whites, and practically no lips. The gums receded, revealing crooked teeth sculpted into a permanent sneer. Helen screamed.

IX

The boy didn’t make any sound, but turned, and ran back down the hill through the cornfield. Helen caught her breath, still startled at the deformed, but apparently natural visitor. She watched him rustle through the stalks, go to the house opposite the graveyard, and ran inside.

Moments later, a burly, middle aged man emerged. He squinted up at Helen, frowning, and she felt afraid again.

“Hey you!” he shouted up. “This is private property!”

“You stay away!” Helen shouted back, sounding bolder than she actually felt.

To her surprise, the man raised his hands in a placating gesture. The boy and a woman poked their heads out of the door.

“Look lady, I don’t want any trouble,” he replied. “But if you don’t explain why you’re here, I’m calling the police.”

Helen considered running, but had no idea where to go. Besides, her car was still down there anyway. Could she trust the stranger? Surely in broad daylight, and with the witnesses, he wouldn’t try to harm her.

“How can I be sure?” she asked.

He frowned again, but took a step back towards his family. “Come down here, tell me what you’re doing, and I won’t have to get the police involved. There’s nothing to steal in that house, and nothing but woods past it.”

Helen knew she couldn’t stay up there forever. Slowly, tensely, she began to walk back to the path.

“All right. I’m coming,” she agreed.

In moments, she was through the field again, and separated from the man only by the road.

“I value our privacy,” he told her. “I tend the cemetery grounds for the town because no one else will. Not since old Whately disappeared.”

“The house is haunted,” the boy piped up.

“Hush Jonathan,” the woman next to him said. “No it isn’t.”

“Who are you?” Helen asked them.

“My name is Bill Hanover,” the man replied. “You are?”

“Helen Ferris,” she answered. “Hanover like there?” She pointed at the graveyard.

“I’m named for an ancestor,” he said slowly. “Are you some kind of ghost hunter, or something?”

“You wouldn’t believe me,” Helen said.

He raised his eyebrows. “Well maybe you should tell me, just the same. Like I said, I don’t want to call the police, but how do I know what you’re after?”

“Would you like to come in?” the woman asked. “You can tell us inside. Maybe we could help.”

“Marion,” Bill began.

“Well, we never have visitors,” Marion argued. “Why not?”

Helen considered. Although she wanted to go home, and leave this strange place, she also realized that the caretaker might tell her more.

She nodded at them. “Why not?” she repeated.

The boy, Jonathan, sat on the floor, drawing with crayons while Bill, Marion, and Helen sat at their table. Marion had poured them all coffee. They explained that Marion had been a nurse at Whately Hospital until their son had been born. He had such a severe hair lip that they had opted to move to the country, and home school him rather than subject him to the bullying of other children. They didn’t have near enough money to afford an operation to correct it.

Helen found herself opening up to them, for once the initial mistrust and defensiveness had worn off, they

turned out to be very pleasant people. She told them a little about her moving business, and how Nathan had been in an accident. She told them that he had had dreams of Whately, and didn't know if they would call her crazy or not.

"So, when Nathan began seeing these things, it led me here," Helen said. "Everything he saw in his earlier dreams is here. Dr. Thorne, the psychiatrist, thinks he's delusional, but I knew there was more to it than that. For some reason, there is a link to him and Mr. Whately."

Bill and Marion looked at each other. "If that's true, Ms. Ferris, then I'm sorry for you," Bill said.

She blinked. "You believe me? I thought you would tell me I needed to go to the hospital myself."

“I used to work at Whately,” Marion said. “I started after Mr. Whately’s disappearance, but people told me that that’s when the treatment problems started there.”

“People said it was cursed,” Bill said.

Marion shook her head and looked at her son. “Jonathan and a few other children were born like that. I could see the whole curse angle. But he’s a good boy, Ms. Ferris. Smart, friendly, well behaved. We just have no money to help him.”

Helen nodded, thinking how it would have been if her son had been born that way. “Is there anything I can do?” she asked. “Maybe my church can raise a fund or something for an operation.”

“We can’t ask that,” Bill replied.

“I just want to help.” She was sorry she had screamed at Jonathan earlier.

“Just do what you can for your brother,” Marion said.

“I don’t know what to do,” Helen confessed. “I was debating about whether to go on to Lagoda, to try and find more, or if I’d be better off staying away.”

Bill reached over to the counter, picking up a newspaper. He handed it to her. “I wouldn’t go to Lagoda now,” he said. “The county sheriff is up there, dealing with a fire. Apparently, Dr. Lagoda is dead. His house burned to the ground.”

“What?” Helen asked, surprised.

He nodded. “If what your brother saw was true, if Whately disappeared because of witchcraft in Lagoda, then it seems to have backfired on him.”

Helen thought about it. Deals with evil spirits would end up with death and damnation for anyone foolish

enough to try them. She wondered what had gone wrong, what had caused the spirit to turn on Lagoda after all these years. Hopefully, no one else would go down the same pathway as Mr. Whately. But what of Nathan?

“I don’t like the devil. Don’t like the devil. Don’t like the devil,” Jonathan said, from where he was coloring.

“Are you okay, honey?” Marion asked.

“He had a nightmare last night,” Bill remarked. “He’s been restless all day.”

Jonathan stood, and carried what he had been drawing over to Helen.

“Is that for me?” Helen asked, smiling. She had hoped that he hadn’t been hurt earlier when she screamed. He had startled her more than anything.

But the drawing startled her even further. While drawn in red crayon, the picture showed no horned figure carrying a pitchfork. Instead, Helen saw a child's depiction of a wizened old man with a third arm in his chest.

X

"But he was on the floor listening to you," Dr. Thorne protested.

Helen had gone in the next day with Jonathan's picture, the newspaper article, and her cell phone pictures. Now, more than ever, she was convinced that Whately really had a link with Nathan. If she could convince the doctor, and get him to take Nathan off of medication, then perhaps they could all find out the truth of how the Whately story ended.

“I didn’t tell him about the picture,” Helen countered. “The two are too similar to be a coincidence. You saw the photos too. This is real.”

“I can’t accept that,” Dr. Thorne replied. But his voice wavered, as his mind ran out of ‘logical’ explanations. For the first time, he was being forced to admit the possibility of something beyond his understanding.

“Well, perhaps you should,” Helen said. “Because when you need to pray, who will you pray to?”

Dr. Thorne shifted nervously in his seat. “Nathan has taken a turn for the worse. He’s in a coma. Nothing we’ve tried to do has helped him. He only mutters something about the basement.”

“May I see him?” Helen asked.

The doctor nodded, and they went up to his room. Nathan was asleep, and the only sound was the beeping of life support. Helen sat with him for nearly an hour, but he never stirred. Nathan had moved somewhere beyond her reach.

"Nathan?"

Nathan found himself in a narrow, dimly lit hallway. The poor lighting, musty smell, and staircase at the hall's end showed him to be in a basement. He felt a presence behind him, and turned to see Dr. Fowler standing there.

"Doctor, what's happening?" Nathan asked. "Can you tell me? Why am I seeing all this?"

"I am showing you the visions, Nathan," Dr. Fowler said. "As you saw, I once tried to witness to Morgan

Whately, but to no avail. He pursued another way of salvation with horrible consequences."

"What happened to him?"

"Come and see." Dr. Fowler walked past him, motioned for him to follow, and led him down the stairs.

Dr. Thorne sat in his office, pouring over the notes on Nathan Paxton's case. He had to admit, for a delusion, it intruded on reality more than he cared to think. Especially when Helen gave him the photographic evidence.

She was trying to protect her brother, and Dr. Thorne supposed that he understood. He had read about the true Whately disappearance. For a few years, it had attracted attention among ghost hunters. It had even been featured on one of those paranormal shows in the

early nineties. People had tried to stay in the abandoned house, but had experienced nothing beyond a vague feeling of dread. Nevertheless, the house had remained abandoned ever since. No other relatives had been found, and Whately's only other possession, his sizable bank account, had vanished with him.

Of course, the most likely explanation, the one the authorities accepted, was that Morgan Whately had simply wanted to disappear. Still, there was something else, something that suggested that maybe he was wrong, and Nathan wasn't just half remembering pieces of a story he had heard before.

One element still seemed unresolved to him. Nathan seemed fixated on the hospital basement, convinced that something was there. He decided to have a look around, and see if there was anything that Nathan could possibly be familiar with.

“This is how Whately disappeared,” Dr. Fowler said.

He and Nathan had walked down a flight of stairs to a small sub basement. Originally, it had probably been meant for storage, but now was empty. He and the minister were watching Morgan Whately standing in the middle. He had lit several candles, and had placed them in a circle around him. Wringing his hands fearfully, he was chanting low in his throat.

“I never knew what had happened to him while I was still alive,” Fowler said. “No one did. But now, I no longer see in a mirror dimly. Lagoda killed him to be a ‘sacrifice,’ for his spirits. But then he hit on the idea of using Whately to obtain further sacrifices, without having to directly kill anyone.”

Whately continued to chant. He had died, and become one of the necromancer's spirits, using his own dead body as a skin walker. A warm breeze began to blow through the room. About half of the candles flickered out, but Nathan saw Whately clutch at his chest, as though experiencing pain.

"What is happening?" he managed to squeeze out, before sinking to his knees.

Nathan looked on, horrified but unable to move. Not that it would have mattered; he was still seeing the past. He heard a wet, sickening crunch, and Whately looked at his chest. Nathan couldn't see what he saw, but the man began to scream repeatedly, in mixed fear and agony.

The last of the candles blew out, and the screams died away. However, Nathan could still see Dr. Fowler,

as if the minister had his own source of light. The latter turned to Nathan gravely.

"The skin walker created a rift between life and death, and lay dormant here for fifty years. The rift it created caused others in this hospital to fall sick and die, for its power is the power of hell."

"Why then are you showing me all this now?" Nathan asked.

"Because you had the accident in Lagoda while on your last job," Fowler explained. "Like him, you are now between life and death. He sensed you, and where you had recently been, and now is trying to stir."

He looked at Nathan again. "He mustn't leave this place. If he does, he will take the sickness effects with him."

“I never meant to do that,” Nathan protested. “I didn’t even know.”

“It isn’t your fault,” Fowler confirmed. “But you still need to stop him. When he’s gone, the rift will collapse behind him. You must do this, for this is the last trace of Inana’s legacy. Once this wound is healed, Oakwood will be completely free of her at last.”

Nathan’s vision blurred and he rubbed his eyes involuntarily. When his sight cleared, he noted that he was back in his room. Slowly, he sat up in bed, and tried to think about what he could do.

Dr. Thorne walked down to the basement. Although still well lit, both the cafeteria and the pharmacy doors

were shut. He looked down the hall, but it ended, only to branch off to the right.

He walked down the hall, turned, and looked. There was another door, only a few yards away, also shut. Dr. Thorne took a step forward, but then stopped.

A chill crept up his spine as he approached that door. Some feeling entered him, warning him away. Whatever was there should be left alone.

The psychiatrist shook his head to clear it. But of course, that was ridiculous. There weren't any such things as ghosts or demons. He was a rational man; he didn't believe stories that would frighten children. He only felt unnerved because he was alone and had been thinking too much of Paxton's delusions.

Reaching for the door, he yanked it open. He pawed the wall beyond the door, and flicked on the light. He

saw only a few boxes and an empty bookshelf at the far wall. Dr. Thorne breathed a sigh of relief, and even chuckled to himself. How foolish he felt to be spooked at being alone.

He stepped into the room and looked at the boxes on the floor. They appeared to be old records from pharmacy and human resources. Nothing like that would have any meaning for Paxton. He was about to leave when he heard a tap from the bookshelf.

Dr. Thorne looked up. No, it hadn't come from the bookshelf so much as behind it. Frowning, he walked up to the bookcase, almost mesmerized. He reached out, and began to pull on the shelf. They were heavy, and it took considerable strength to get the case from the wall, but when he did, he stepped around to look at what was behind.

To his surprise, he saw another door.

The doctor opened it, and flipped on a light switch. He saw another small flight of stairs leading down to a metal door. Evidently, it was a sub basement of some kind. He didn't even know it was there, although almost no one came here. He wondered why the bookcase had been put there.

He thought about going down there, but then decided that it might be better to come back later. After all, he told himself there could be asbestos or vermin or…

The door at the bottom of the stairs opened.

Dr. Thorne froze as he saw a pale, wrinkled hand on the doorknob. The room beyond the door was pitch black, but a very pale, old, wizened man wearing a long dirty brown coat emerged. The man looked up at the psychiatrist, and gave him an unreadable look. Then he

began to ascend; beneath his coat, something was moving.

The doctor cried out in fear, and began to push the bookcase back over the doorway. Without thinking, he tried in vain to seal the figure back in, but he wasn't fast enough. Dr. Thorne heard rapid footsteps, and felt the man pushing back.

"Oh God!" Dr. Thorne cried, invoking the name of someone he didn't even believe in. Panicked, he pushed with all his strength. He didn't dare run; the man would definitely catch him then. So, he kept on pushing, but the other man was stronger, and managed to shove the case on top of him. Dr. Thorne slammed to the ground.

With the bookcase still on him, he looked up. The figure stepped out, and bent down over him. The coat fell back, and Dr. Thorne screamed over and over.

XI

Helen pulled up to the hospital parking lot. She had intended to see Nathan again. Part of her hated coming day after day, because she felt so useless. She had tried to help him, but felt powerless to stop what was happening to him. On the other hand, he was her brother. She loved him, and would never abandon him.

Three police cars were in front of the door, sirens flashing. She got out, and ran up to the door, but several policemen stood there. One of them saw her, and held up a hand to stop her.

“I’m sorry, ma’am, but the hospital is locked down,” he told her. “No one is allowed in or out until further notice.”

“What’s going on?” she asked.

“Helen,” Dr. Stephens’ voice called out. Helen looked, and saw the doctor wave at her from where another policeman was questioning her. She walked up to Helen, but the cops still didn’t let anyone through.

“Helen, Dr. Thorne has been murdered.”

“What?” Helen couldn’t believe it. While she had disliked the man, she certainly hadn’t wanted anything to happen to him.

“Housekeeping found him this morning,” she said quickly, ignoring the detective’s shock at revealing case details.

“He’d been strangled, and had a book case pushed on him. It was in a basement room that no one ever used.”

“Doctor, this needs to be kept confidential,” the detective warned.

“She’s a friend, not a reporter,” Dr. Stephens retorted. She turned back to Helen, and there was fear in her eyes.

“The bookcase was blocking another stairway,” she whispered. “There’s this little room, a sub basement. It was empty, except for a few candles and bits of junk. Helen…somebody had been there. There…was dust that had been kicked up…”

“Doctor,” the detective repeated.

The doctor looked straight at Helen. “Dr. Thorne’s body had three bruise marks. One on each shoulder, and one on the neck. All three looked like hands…”

Both of them had read or heard Dr. Thorne’s reports on Nathan’s visions. How Morgan Whately had

encountered the occult, and then vanished. But drawings had turned up, showing the old man, ghoulish and possessing three hands. What had happened to him? Where had he gone? Indeed, had he really gone anywhere after all?

"Nathan?" Helen said. "Is Nathan all right?"

"I'm going to have to ask you to leave," the officer replied. He frowned at both women. "Don't tell anyone else about this. And don't tell the press anything."

Helen knew that she wouldn't get to see him. So, she clasped the doctor's hand, and turned to go home. She only had one more thing to say to them.

"Please," she said. "Keep my brother safe."

Nathan had been awake for most of the day. Oddly enough, when the pain had subsided, the blurred vision

had increased. It was almost as if he had nearly left the world altogether.

Nurses had rushed around earlier. In hushed tones, he had heard them talk about Dr. Thorne's death. Nathan had felt sorrow, but not surprise. After all, Whately was stirring, and the psychiatrist, while professing disbelief, had had too inquiring a mind to not investigate.

Evening had fallen, and the police had allowed the morning nurses to clock out and return home. They had not been anywhere near the murder scene anyway. Now, only one nurse was at the station, and the only sound was the sound of fluid and pain medicine being infused into him.

A small cry sounded from outside his door. Nathan sat up, and heard a few muffled cries followed by a loud

thud. Then, hollow footsteps began to sound, as someone approached his door.

The door opened, and a man entered. Nathan had never seen him physically, but now knew him well. He was dressed in a tattered coat, and something shuffled beneath.

“Mr. Whately,” Nathan said. “I’ve been waiting for you.”

“You…” Whately replied. His voice was very dry and low, having not been used for a long time. “You…know it…all. You’ve…seen…all.”

“Yes,” Nathan nodded. “But to what end? How many more will die for your sins?”

“I…live,” Whately said. “Forever.” He scowled darkly and approached the mover. “Now you die.”

“Helen?”

Helen stirred, and tried to roll over to go back to sleep. She had been tired, and figured that she had been dreaming. The last few days of balancing work and hospital visits had drained her, and she was trying to catch up on her rest.

“Helen, wake up,” the voice repeated, more urgently this time.

Helen shot up in bed, realizing that she was neither dreaming nor alone. Someone else stood by her bed. Someone from her past.

Dr. Fowler was there, clear enough to be seen, but faint enough to see her dresser through him. She gasped as she realized that a ghost stood before her. He too had a part in the story of Whately, she remembered.

“Helen, please don’t be afraid,” Fowler’s spirit told her. “I’m no threat to you. But I need your help. Whately is killing Nathan.”

“Nathan? Whately?” Helen shook her head to clear it. “I don’t understand.”

“You know most of his story already,” Fowler said. “He is the being in the drawings. He became that after his dealings with Lagoda. An experimental and special kind of skin walker, one who’s dark energy would sicken people around him just as Inana’s direct spirits once did. He is the curse of the hospital.”

“What must I do?” Helen asked. Her fear subsided, and now she only thought of her brother.

“He needs your help. Help I cannot give.”

“Why not?” she frowned. “I thought the dead were more powerful than the living.” She thought of ghost

stories that depicted spirits as having unlimited telekinesis and other such talents.

Fowler shook his head. “You’re thinking about ghosts that are tied to a specific place. I’m not. Besides, I am dead. Whately and Nathan are both in between. To help your brother fight, you need to be as they are.”

She nodded, although she still didn’t understand.

“Do you trust me, Helen?” Fowler asked. “You must trust me.”

“I always have.”

“Then, God forgive me. There’s no other way.”

He passed his hand through her. Helen felt a cold chill course through her veins, as though someone had collected freezing rain, and was now infusing it into her. She looked up at Fowler, but he didn’t reply. Instead, he passed his hand through her again. She wanted to ask

what he was doing, but he offered no explanations, and kept swiping his hand through her. Her heart began to slow, and her skin grew clammy. Her head swimming, Helen finally crumpled to the ground.

The next thing she knew, Dr. Fowler had her by the hand, and was walking so fast that he nearly dragged her along. Looking around, she saw that they were in the ICU of the hospital, but couldn't say how they'd gotten there. Most of the doors were either closed or cracked, so she couldn't see anyone else.

They walked into the nurse's station. The night nurse was slumped over on the ground. Three bruise marks appeared on her shoulders and neck. In front of her, a cart was opened, revealing several syringes of pain medicine.

Helen pulled away from Fowler for a moment. The syringes gave her an idea, and she picked one up. She saw that her hand was somewhat transparent, but she could still grasp the object.

“Yes,” Fowler replied. “You are now between as well.”

He stood before the door where Nathan was staying. “You must go on, Helen. I can’t interfere; I’m not in the same realm. But I will pray for you. God willing, you can take him by surprise.”

Helen opened the door. Still holding the syringe she stepped in to see Nathan thrashing on the bed. There was no visible assailant, but he looked as though he was taking blows.

She ran towards him, but her vision blurred. When she could see again, she stood in a dark room. Candles

standing on metal sticks created a perimeter in which two men fought. Nathan was wrestling with Whately, but the older man was far stronger than he looked, and easily repulsed the mover. The latter seemed to be fumbling with his jacket while still fighting.

Helen moved in quickly. Fortunately, she was still barefoot and in her nightgown, so her feet made little noise as she entered the circle. Holding up the syringe, she wasn't sure whether the shot would work, but knew it was the only chance. She carefully made sure Whately's back was to her as she moved in with the medicine.

Nathan looked up, and saw her. Surprise registered on his face, and his opponent saw it. He began to turn around just as Helen stabbed at his back.

The shot hit his shoulder, and the needle broke off. Whately cried out in pain and surprise. Flailing wildly,

he knocked Helen to the ground. She got a look at him, noting that his face appeared even more tortured than the illustrations. Temporarily forgetting Nathan, he turned on her. While the medicine had enough to kill a living person, Whately was only half alive, and didn't die.

Nathan reached out, and grabbed a candlestick. Whately heard, turned around again, and saw Nathan, but the mover shoved the stick in Whately's chest. The medicine had slowed him enough to keep him from moving out of the way. Whately screamed, and fell down. Helen saw the other end sticking out of his back.

She got up, and watched Whately writhing in pain. He looked up at her, and his expression became lost, pleading, as though he knew he had failed.

"Help me," he told her. "Help me please! I don't want to die! I don't want to die!"

He screamed, and burst into flame. Sickened, Helen turned away, and felt a flash of heat. Then, when she dared look again, she saw only ash.

“Nathan?” She walked over to him, bent down, and held her brother. He looked up, and smiled weakly.

“You came,” he said. “I don’t know how, but you came for me.”

He looked up, and smiled again. She turned in the direction where his eyes wandered, and saw Dr. Fowler beyond the circle. He raised his arms in triumph, and faded away. Once he was lost to view, the candles began to dim.

Helen turned back to Nathan. She saw that he, too, was fading. He caught her eye, and nodded in acceptance. “I’m dying, sis.”

“No.” She felt tears forming in her eyes. “Stay with us. Don’t give up.”

“It’s all right. I know where I’m going. I’m not afraid.” Slowly, weakly, he reached up to brush away a tear that had fallen. “I’m not afraid.”

He kept fading, and she tried to hold onto him. His gaze went past her, and a look of pure joy lit up his otherwise dimming form. “Elaine!” he said.

Then, her view darkened again. She found herself back in her bedroom, still on the ground. The fuzziness cleared, and she thought of all she had seen and felt. She thought of Whately, and his choices that had brought so much ruin, both to himself and others. She didn’t know whether to pity him or to be glad that he was now gone. At least, the hospital that bore his name would be able to heal once more.

She thought of Nathan. He had left this world. She felt it, and knew that he had passed on to the Savior's realm. He now was learning and seeing what no one else living knew. Now he saw face to face.

The phone rang. She picked it up to hear Dr. Stephens' voice. "Helen? Are you there?"

"Yes," she said, somewhat distantly.

"Helen…I'm sorry. Nathan just passed away. I did all I could but…we lost him."

Helen smiled a bittersweet smile. "No," she whispered. "You didn't."